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PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLES

A Universel Success: Virtual Reality of Reaching for the Stars

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Keywords: Conference, Metaverse, Artificial Intelligence, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Virtual Reality, Higher Education, Human-Centered AI, Immersive Learning, Community of Inquiry, Intercollegiate

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This practice-based, narrative article chronicles the eighteen-month development and execution of the Universel 2025 (U25) conference, an interdisciplinary event exploring the intersection of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and human-centered education. Leaders in online higher education can benefit from exploring this conference's planning, implementation, lessons learned, and successes. Originally conceived as "MetaverSEL," the project pivoted in response to evolving political discourse regarding Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and the rapid emergence of generative AI. The narrative details a "stone soup" approach to conference planning, leveraging limited financial resources, including a foundational seed grant from National University's Cause Research Institute, and significant human capital from a coalition of scholars across academic and private sectors. The conference utilized a dual-platform strategy, integrating Zoom Events for traditional sessions with EngageVR for immersive, AI-assisted virtual environments designed to foster spatial and social presence. Highlights from the 21 sessions across three days underscored three core themes:

• AI as a Human Amplifier: Technology serves to enhance, rather than replace, educator creativity and student wellbeing.

• Immersion as Pedagogy: VR has matured into a viable environment for both cognitive and emotional engagement.

• Students as Co-Creators: The future of educational technology must be designed in partnership with learners.

Post-event analysis indicates high attendee satisfaction (NPS +29), specifically praising the practical applications of AI chatbots and immersive learning. The authors conclude by reflecting on future improvements, emphasizing a shift toward more dynamic, active learning formats and more robust marketing strategies to expand institutional outreach.

Keywords: Conference, Community of Inquiry, Metaverse, Intercollegiate, Artificial Intelligence, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Virtual Reality, Higher Education, Human-Centered AI, Immersive Learning

How We Got Here: From Metaverse to Universel, Rationale for U25

About a million years ago - okay, 2022 - a few of us at National University got curious about what might happen when learning collided with the Metaverse: a "perpetual and persistent multiuser environment merging physical reality with digital virtuality" (Mystakidis, 2022, p. 486). In other words, a place where everyone can hang out, socialize, spend money, and,

most importantly, *learn*. Under the leadership of Brian Arnold, a small team formed to explore what learning could look like once the infrastructure was in place: systems capable of supporting widespread use, tracking, assessment, and adoption of XR technologies. You know, after we moved past the awkward phase of strapping TVs to our faces. We imagined a future where virtual learning wasn't just a novelty, it was intentional, thoughtful, and rooted in everything we already understood about how people learn. We weren't interested in showing up in VR like it was learning day one. We wanted Social Emotional Learning (Durlak et al., 2011) to be embedded in the very DNA of our design, the foundational layer of all our thinking. And that's how the portmanteau *MetaverSEL* was born.

Fast forward a year or so. The group expanded, welcoming folks from other institutions of higher learning, and many a heady discussion ensued. What would governance look like in the Metaverse? Fashion? Who would make the rules, and how would they be enforced? Could we somehow cobble together a lifelong learning record, one that allows (seemingly) futuristic technologies to customize learning environments to individual learners' needs (EDUCAUSE, 2022), or better yet, bring them together in real communities of virtual learning? Imbricated in all this excitement and reimagining of our roles and our collective futures was the dawn of AI. The ever-increasing presence of ChatGPT became an inflection point of discussion, confusion, anticipation, and bonding over what was possible and what was next in the world of higher education learning.

And then life happened. People got busy. The novelty wore off. And while our conversations in The MetaverSEL Group were rich and engaging, they remained just that: *conversations*. No clear goals, no deadlines, no moment where the rubber met the road.

So we pivoted. Foreshadow alert, this happened a lot.

We decided to host a conference that would embody everything we'd been discussing. The idea of the metaverse, after all, was predicated on community, innovation, and thought leadership. The occasion demanded wide contribution and diverse perspectives. But it needed to be bigger... something universal. Thus a modified portmanteau and a new conference, the *UniverSEL* conference, 2025 (U25) was born. UniverSEL, always capital SEL, became not just a shorthand term, but a rendition of a not-quite-yet but nearly impending future of education and human connection. New people joined, others offramped, and we began turning ideas into (virtual) reality.

Meanwhile, we blinked, and suddenly there was a nationwide backlash against the term SEL. The Department of Education, in a February 2025 "Dear Colleagues" letter, conveyed that we would need to rid our conference of particular verbiage, including SEL.

So, we pivoted.

Our spelling stuck; Universel was set into digital stone via our website and promotional materials, but the capitalization changed. The all caps spotlight of SEL was muted (Universel was born of UniverSEL), and the spirit of

U25 continued onwards, toward the greater mission of creating a monument in communal learning. Also, we added a small star field to our banner, emphasizing the universe root of Universel. Tada.

Now all we had to do was stand up a conference.

From Seed Grants to Stone Soup

The first and most crucial resource in our quest to build the Universel conference was human. The project was founded on the passion of many brave, thoughtful, and selfless scholars who contributed their time, expertise, and no small amount of cheerleading to create a space for exploring the intersection of social-emotional learning and humane emerging technologies. With this foundation of human capital, our next break was financial. We received a foundational seed grant from National University's generous Cause Research Institute (CRI). A huge thank you is due to Tom Stewart and Heather Hussey, who, upon hearing about our project, invited us to apply. We were delighted to receive a few thousand dollars to get the ball rolling.

While there were nearly endless ways to invest these funds, we leveraged a relationship with Sofia Eddy, a talented and experienced event planner and art director. Won over by the conference premise, Sofia offered to develop our brand identity for literal pennies on the dollar of what she is worth. Her foundational work establishing our visual identity and a professional landing page was a critical catalyst. It empowered team members to share the conference vision with their communities, which in turn grew awareness, drew submissions, and attracted even more volunteers.

This newfound professional polish opened the door to institutional legitimacy. As logistical needs like payment for hosting platforms arose, Dean Robert Lee graciously allowed the conference to use his school as a budget line - a formal step that opened many subsequent doors. This was quickly followed by another milestone when National University President Mark Milliron agreed to serve as our opening plenary speaker, granting us another invaluable level of endorsement. As momentum grew, so did the complexity. We found ourselves juggling a teleconferencing service and an XR platform (we ended up changing horses mid-ride on that one - everyone is still friends thanks to Mark Otis's foresight and diplomacy!). We then needed to establish a process for soliciting and evaluating manuscripts (Kudos to Daniel Johnston for leading the charge here) while simultaneously registering attendees and presenters, a monumental task for which Brian Epp deserves a huge tip of the hat. The project had become a gordian knot of details.

Cue hero's theme music. Out of the wings stepped Luke Cable, armed with his preternatural ability to map Monday onto our complex web of tasks. With a deft and gentle hand, he steered us through the worst of the administrivia, keeping us on task through the long months and endless minutiae of conference planning. And yet, even with this incredible team, vital tools, and institutional backing, there was always more to do and more

we could acquire if we only had the money. This is where we truly made stone soup, cobbling things together from chewing gum and wishes. We staggered across the finish line like dazed, but happy marathoners.

Herding Cats: Amazing Team Members Who Passed Through the Process

That "finish line" we staggered across wasn't really the end, of course. It was the starting line for the conference itself. As anyone who has built an event from the ground up knows, what looks like a smooth "banality of professional life" to an attendee is, behind the scenes, the painstaking and deliberate construction of many stalwart minds. If we did our job right, the mechanics and timing barely registered as an afterthought.

Fortunately for us, stalwart minds were in abundance. But herding them... Well, that's where the title of this section comes from. Our efforts took place across time zones, professional orientations, companies, and schools. We had endless emails. We had marathon meetings. Our Monday boards, Trello boards, Miro Boards, Excel sheets, and documents were deliberated over Teams. The herding itself became a masterclass in administrative oversight. These efforts, invested in onramping, utilizing, and offramping dozens of contributors over more than a year, paid their returns. Our attendees were able to focus on the insights and ideas of the presenters, likely thinking nothing of the construction. For us, the creators, each of the thousands of minute details represented a battleground of triangulation and deliberation. The U25 execution was, thankfully, predicated on the professionalism, care, and diversity of thought of those many cats we herded (see Appendix A).

Multimedia Dreams Realities: Mechanics of Standing up Event

A recurring theme in this adventure was our grand ambitions colliding headfirst with limited resources and, at times, the laws of physics. We dreamed big, then reverse-engineered reality with whatever scraps of wit and budget we could muster until something vaguely executable emerged that we might actually deliver.

What We Imagined

From the outset, our aim was to move beyond a standard virtual meeting and create a dynamic, connected environment where learning and imagination could converge. The team envisioned an immersive world with intentionally designed spaces: a central hub for keynotes, breakout halls for sessions, and interactive exhibits that blended education and exploration. These expansive, navigable environments would include conference areas, vendor halls, exhibit zones, student and faculty poster sessions, outdoor experiential areas, and lecture halls where participants could collaborate and exchange ideas.

Led by Mark Otis, the XR team aimed to make participants feel part of something larger, merging scholarly dialogue with visual storytelling through integrated video, audio, and interactive content that encouraged reflection

and discovery. We conceived of VR not as a novelty but as a framework for human connection, grounded in inclusion, accessibility, and emotional engagement. Research suggests that immersive environments, which foster spatial, social, and cognitive presence, can enhance learning, empathy, and engagement across various disciplines (Wei et al., 2025).

Conceptual VR Space Features

To realize this vision, the team considered incorporating features such as:

- Scavenger hunts to encourage exploration and problem-solving
- Interactive AI avatars for answering questions, offering guidance, and providing tips
- A 'Cognitive Kinetics Lab' to explore the principles of embodied cognition simulating physical movement (throwing, jumping, tracing patterns in airspace) in VR (Johnson-Glenberg, 2018).
- An 'Emotion Mapping Studio' based on foundational work in affective computing, where users manipulate color, sound, and motion in response to emotional expression.
- History Reconstruction areas native to EngageVR, allowing interaction with historical figures like Socrates, Tesla, and Marie Curie within a VR sandbox

The spaces were intentionally designed to be safe, supportive, and engaging, encouraging attendees to explore freely, connect authentically, and interact without barriers. AI-generated art and objects brought the worlds to life, enriching them with visual and emotional depth through immersive halls, abstract sculptures, and thematic portals that reflected the conference's Social Emotional Learning (SEL) foundations and the overall Universel conference vision.

What We Actually Did

Turning that vision into reality required learning how to build a VR conference from the ground up. We explored several options and were pretty far downstream with one platform when we all realized that it was not really optimized for large groups so... you guessed it, we pivoted.

We were delighted to team up with EngageVR (https://engagevr.io) as the backbone platform, a hosting service with live and drop-in sessions inside custom-built virtual environments. A huge thank you to Tomas Kirik at Engage for working with us (and our budget) to make sure that the XR experience knocked the virtual socks off the attendees. Engage provided a flexible, stable foundation for live events and interactive exploration.

AI played a key role in shaping the environment. Generative AI tools produced concept art, illustrations, learning hubs, and abstract landscapes that were converted into assets for VR. These became environmental backdrops, sculptures, interactive objects, and scavenger hunt props, transforming static imagery into immersive, explorable spaces.

To make the world functional, the team balanced creativity with constraints. Some AI-created models were optimized for performance, while others were retextured or simplified to maintain stability across different devices. Audio and multimedia elements were added to help participants orient themselves. A virtual Brian Arnold was stationed at the main room entrance to answer basic conference questions and add a touch of humanity to the space. Some drop-in sessions served as experimental zones where attendees could test navigation, meet others, and experience embodied presence. These pre-conference sessions helped first-time users acclimate to VR and provided crucial insights into pacing, flow, and user support needs.

Integrating the EngageVR sessions within U25 completed the loop, bridging the video sessions (Zoom) and this new "third space." In the end, what the team imagined essentially became what the team built-refined by realism, bandwidth, and iteration. The final experience demonstrated that, with AI assisted design and thoughtful use of VR platforms, conceptual art can evolve into living architecture for learning. Its success stemmed less from technical perfection and more from the human intention driving its design.

All-Star Cast and Their Presentations

The success of the Universel conference is a powerful testament to community and collaboration. What attendees experienced was the culmination of an eighteen-month journey, representing hundreds upon hundreds of hours donated by generous souls from over a dozen different institutions. This coalition of heroes, hailing from academic, private, and freelance backgrounds, formed the backbone of the event. While they are too numerous to list individually, it is essential to state that this conference simply would not have happened without their incredible dedication and shared vision.

Conference Presentation Highlights

Over three days and twenty-one sessions, we showcased a diverse range of thought leadership at the intersection of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and human-centered education. Our presenters demonstrated a shared commitment to a future in which technology is not a replacement for human connection, but a means to enhance it. (Link to videos)

Day One set the tone by emphasizing the human imperative driving technological innovation. Opening speakers, including senior university leaders, explored how emerging technologies such as AI and VR can foster deeper empathy, connection, and belonging across virtual spaces. Sessions on adult wellbeing and SEL reframed social-emotional learning as essential infrastructure for institutional health, not an optional add-on. We saw

practical demonstrations using AI powered video generation, chatbots, and simulation tools to support reflective practice, student regulation, and personalized instruction. A recurring theme quickly emerged: AI is most impactful not as an autonomous agent, but as a collaborator that scaffolds human growth and resilience.

On Day Two, we expanded the lens to institutional transformation and global practice. Presenters examined how AI and VR are reshaping curriculum design, research dissemination, and global student engagement. Several sessions focused on large-scale adoption, revealing how students worldwide are already integrating AI into their academic workflows in ways that far outpace institutional policy. Disability inclusion and culturally responsive innovation were central themes, underscoring technology's role in expanding access and redefining the boundaries of who can fully participate in higher education. The day marked a significant shift from experimentation to systems-building, signaling the emergence of a new academic paradigm in which immersive, emotionally aware technologies are integrated into core learning design.

Day Three brought the conversation into the realm of educational philosophy and long-range impact. Sessions explored whole-learner development, ethical leadership, and the emerging concept of human-AI relationality. Presenters argued that the question is no longer whether AI will shape education, but how humans will define their role in that co-evolution. We heard multigenerational perspectives that revealed varying levels of acceptance and concern, yet consensus formed around one key idea: students must have agency in designing the future of AI in education. XR leaders and systems theorists demonstrated how immersive environments can teach complex concepts through embodiment and simulation, while also raising essential ethical questions about identity, autonomy, and the influence of machines.

As we reflected on the sessions, three major themes stood out to us that define this moment in higher education innovation:

1. **AI as a Human Amplifier:** Rather than replacing educators, AI was consistently positioned as a tool for enhancing connection, creativity, and well-being.

2. **Immersion as Pedagogy:** VR is no longer a conceptual idea; it has matured into a viable and effective environment for meaningful learning experiences that support both emotional and cognitive engagement.

3. **Students as Co-Creators of the Future:** Across disciplines, presenters affirmed that the future of AI and educational technology must be shaped in partnership with learners-not simply delivered to them.

These sessions collectively marked a pivotal moment: the transition from speculative conversation to practical implementation, from technological novelty to strategic, human-centered transformation.

Post Mortem: Numbers on How Things Went

We are delighted to report that attendees received the Universel 2025 conference very positively. Overall satisfaction was high, with most respondents rating the event between 8 and 10. This positive sentiment was reflected in a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of +29, indicating that attendees found the sessions innovative, relevant, and strongly aligned with their professional goals.

The conference's central theme, the intersection of emerging technologies like AI and VR with human connection, resonated deeply. This topic was consistently praised as being "very effectively" addressed. Feedback affirmed the perspective that AI should remain a supportive tool, not a replacement for empathy. This aligns directly with the principles of Human-Centered AI, which prioritizes human agency and oversight (Shneiderman, 2022). As attendees noted, humans must "co-author and collaborate *with* AI," recognizing that "AI will never be able to replicate critical social-emotional concepts."

Specific sessions generated particularly strong engagement. "Using Technology to Enhance Human Connections" drew the largest live audience with 40 attendees. "Adult SEL: A Real and Responsive Approach to Educator Wellbeing" proved to be the most interactive session, sparking 100 chat messages. We also saw significant Q&A engagement in sessions covering multigenerational AI use, disability-inclusive design, and AI-powered chatbots, demonstrating strong community interest in the practical and ethical application of these technologies.

Regarding the event platforms, nearly all users rated Zoom Events "Excellent". Engage VR received mixed reviews, ranging from "Excellent" to "Fair," with some feedback citing connectivity or usability challenges. In addition to the platforms themselves, we have to give a big tip of the hat to the entire team at Open Exchange for their help in ensuring our event looked professional. Every one of them was a consummate professional, an impressive team. Attendees left with many practical ideas, including the use of AI chatbots for student support, VR for immersive learning, and specific tools like Claude, Perplexity, and HeyGen.

We also gathered valuable, constructive feedback for future planning. Many attendees requested longer sessions to allow for deeper discussion and more dynamic, visual, driven formats over "talking heads." Furthermore, registration data indicated that most participants heard about the event through presenter referrals or librarians. This highlights a significant opportunity to broaden our promotion and outreach strategies to ensure the event's visibility matches the quality of its content.

Next time: What We Would Do Differently and Hope To Do Again

First, we'd have a huuuge budget, endless resources, endless volunteers and-hmm? Oh, realistically?

Looking ahead, we are excited to build on the strong foundation of Universel 2025. We were thrilled by the high level of interest in our core themes and certainly hope to continue these vital conversations. We plan to leverage the positive momentum by expanding sessions that explore human-AI collaboration, immersive learning, and the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) with technology.

Based on valuable attendee feedback, our main area for improvement will be enhancing the session experience. We heard the call for more dynamic formats, and we agreed. While "talking head" presentations have been a staple of conferences since Cave Con, research overwhelmingly shows that passive listening is less effective than active learning (Freeman et al., 2014). We see a clear opportunity to push the form to better fit the function and model a more engaging approach.

To that end, we will focus on incorporating more visuals, interactive examples, and practical case studies into our programming. Alongside enhancing the format, we are also actively considering extending session times. This would allow for the deeper, more complex discussions our audience is clearly passionate about.

Our other strategic focus will be marketing and analytics. We recognize a significant opportunity to grow our audience by strengthening our promotional efforts, including a more robust social media strategy and broader institutional outreach. To support this, we will implement more sophisticated data tracking. By standardizing how we capture visitor and registrant data and improving our source tracking, we can better measure the effectiveness of our campaigns, refine our audience targeting, and ensure our content reaches everyone who could benefit.

If we learned anything, it's the importance of a shared vision. It allows a team to leverage its network, stay flexible, and pivot often.

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Appendix

There are two appendices. Appendix A lists many of the conference supporters and Appendix B list conference presentations.

Appendix A

Just the short list of conference heroes. There were dozens more who dipped in and out, adding value and amplifying our efforts a thousand fold.

- Brian Arnold
- Brian Epp
- Daniel Johnston
- Gordon Inman
- Heather Hussey
- Joshua Eckenrode
- Justin Vogelar
- Luke Cable
- Mark Otis
- Mary-Kate Najarian
- Melody Rawlings
- Nicole Luke
- Pamela Thompson
- Paul Gartzke
- Phil Oels
- Robert Lee
- Richie Ressel
- Rohit Mehta
- Sofia Eddy
- Scott Moss
- Steven Crawford
- Taryn Robertson
- Taylor Freeman

- Thomas Stewart

APPENDIX B

Snapshot of the conference sessions, titles and speakers. Videos here.

Day & Session	Speaker	Title
Day 1 - Session 1	Dr. Rober Lee & Dr. Mark Milliron	Using Technology To Enhance Human Connections
Day 1 - Session 2	Ken Shelton	Adult SEL: A Real And Responsive Approach to Educator Wellbeing
Day 1 - Session 3	Zhuoer Chen	HeyGen For Education
Day 1 - Session 4	Dr. Cheryl Scott, Dana M. Wiley, Allyson Smith	Can Artificial Intelligence (AI) Be An Educational Partner in the Development of an Interprofessional Simulation Experience for Medical Laboratory Science (MLS) and Nursing Students
Day 1 - Session 5	Dr. Punya Mishra	The Promise And Paradox Of Creative AI
Day 1 - Session 6	Dr. Jaime Bissa, Dana M. Wiley, & Dr. Cherl Scott	Bots And Balance - Designing AI Tools That Support Student Self-Regulation and Wellbeing
Day 1 - Session 7	Dr. Jaime Bissa & Laur Baker	Designing AI-Powered Chatbots For Personalized Learning: A Showcase for Instructional Design and Student Support
Day 2 - Session 1	Dr. Angela Gunder & Dr. Sean Leahy	The Mirror, The Muse, And The Machine
Day 2 - Session 2	Dr. Laura Spencer & Meghan Freeman	Beyond Engagement - Redefining Curriculum with AI + VR for SEL and Academic Mastery
Day 2 - Session 3	Dr. Matthew Lippincott	Leveraging AI For Scalable Team Performance
Day 2 - Session 4	Andy Albrecht	What We Learned- Rethinking Generative AI for Teaching and Learning on ScienceDirect
Day 2 - Session 5	Stewart Tucker Lundy	Access Point - Designing a Culture of Belonging Through Disability-Inclusive Innovation
Day 2 - Session 6	Luisa Baum, Ewelina Lacey, Lori Robbins, & Casandra Silva	AI On Every Campus - What Students Worldwide Are Doing With GenAI
Day 2 - Session 7	Dr. Cynthia Sistek & Dr. Scott Moss	Emotional Intelligence Meets Artificial Intelligence- Building Durable Human Skills for the AI Era
Day 3 - Session 1	George Siemens	AI And Humans - Developing the Whole Learner
Day 3 - Session 2	Taylor Freeman	From Prototype to Scale - Lessons from a Decade of XR in Education
Day 3 - Session 3	Dr. Laine Goldman & Dr. Federica Fornaciari	Why Having a Relationship With Your AI Matters - A Dialogue in Three Intelligences
Day 3 - Session 4	Maxwell McGee	Innovative Education - Implementing Emerging Tech in Academic Environments
Day 3 - Session 5	Dr. Thomas Stewart	AI Usage in the Workplace from a Multigenerational Perspective
Day 3 - Session 6	Dr. Mbuyi Mukendi	Systems Theory of Pathology involving Machine Learning and Deep Learning
Day 3 - Session 7	Dr. Michael Lubelfeld	Ensuring that Students Lead the Way in Defining How AI Serves Their Learning