You Say You Want a Revolution, Well, You Know...

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You Say You Want a Revolution, Well, You Know…

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We all want to change the world.

In education we want to change the world of learning to be engaging, meaningful, and memorable. For teachers who are excited about their profession, that means the pressure to continually innovate. What does it mean to be innovative in an educational context and what role can technology play?

You tell me that it’s evolution. Well…

There are some eureka moments when we discover something new or something that works with students especially well the first time, but for the most part, it is all about persistence, assessment, reflection, and a positive attitude. The cycle of experimenting on a small scale and then working up to a larger scale, as the purpose and process become clearer, is more likely to lead to success ultimately than one shot at it and the tired cliche, “Oh, I tried that and it didn’t work.”

Some people are great at creating things from scratch—developing a new way of seeing things that nobody has done before. Some people are great at taking what the innovators are doing and adapting an idea, spinning off in a new direction, or putting a new twist on it that makes it work best in a particular environment. I tend to be in the latter group, and rely on websites, conversations with like-minded people, or gurus of tech integrated education to stir my brain cells. The evolution of my thinking takes place best when I can interact with others.

Regarding the latter, people ask me all the time, what is up with Twitter[1]? Why would I care if someone is going to the grocery store right now? Doonesbury had a fun series of cartoons
lambasting the Twitter craze recently. Yet, by March of this year, Twitter has overtaken all but one of the United Kingdom’s news outlets in terms of website hits. In the last year, Nielsen reports that Twitter has grown 1,382 percent in the United States. People are choosing their news and listening to the thinking of their personal gurus through Twitter.

Innovation is often about people tossing ideas into the ring and having them bantered about so that they begin to take some usable shape. There are some interesting people out there and I might want to listen to them brainstorm about technology and education. Tim O’Reilly[3] and Tim Lauer[4] are a couple of examples, although the first Tim is prolific on Twitter and I can’t see myself keeping up that much. Twitter is ideal for that “throw out what you’re thinking” kind of brainstorming, sharing what you are learning and wondering about. Teachers from different schools can form a Twitter group so that they can toss around ideas about teaching with technology. Twitter as a professional development tool! I work with 8-10 pre-service teachers each spring during their student teaching. I am going to have my students Tweet about their experiences during the week so they can join each other in the joys and challenges of developing their teaching skills as they try new teaching strategies. Those tweets can be resources for conversation when we meet for class. We hope to learn from each other. Twitter can be about developing a community of innovators in education.

In regard to websites, there are lots of sources for innovative thinking to tap into. Edutopia[5] is one of my favorites, as it enthusiastically promotes project-based learning and provides video of teachers trying new things with their students. Microsoft sponsors the Innovative Teachers Network[6] and Apple sponsors the Learning Interchange[7] that, although tied to their products, have lots of creative approaches to education that stirs my thinking. The Brits can be a good resource as well, given websites such as FutureLab[8] and The Learning Discovery Centre[9], with a real dedication to innovation in education. Sites such as these can inspire new ways of thinking that technology can support by providing real world examples of innovation in action in schools.

You say you got a real solution. Well, you know, we’d all love to see the plan.

There are so many people and organizations out there that want to financially and materially support innovative thinkers. They want to see your plan for increasing the success of your students and are willing to get you the tools you need to make it happen. Just typing “teacher grants” in Google goes a long way towards finding those resources. Professional, local, and corporate organizations as well as state and federal government links are listed on my grant workshop website.[10] A little bit of time proposing an idea can lead to exciting possibilities, even if it doesn’t get funded the first time around.

Eliot Soloway[11] has been one of the pioneers in how handheld technology can increase students’ achievement in schools. Yet, I think he was a man with a solution before his time. PDA’s in education really haven’t taken off as he had hoped. However, with the dawn of the iPhone, Blackberry, and other smartphones, the mobile Internet is now estimated to be at least one third and possibly up to one half of the Internet usage in the United States.[12] Apple sold 30
million iPhone/iPod touches in the past year. We are now in the midst of a revolution in the capabilities of handheld computers. All of our devices are smooshing into one with phone, GPS, camera, Internet access, word processing, etc. Apple’s facilitation of application creation for the iPhone has caused an incredible explosion of innovation from the silly iFart to potentially life saving tools for diabetics that measure insulin levels and calculate dosages. In less than one year, 25,000 new applications were developed and then downloaded 800 million times. That is one amazing escalation of creativity and consumer demand. While cellular phone companies have a stranglehold on us with monthly plans, other handheld devices such as the iTouch are quietly tagging along with growing capabilities and dropping prices. The $300 graphing calculator of ten years ago is now $45. Innovators seeking new possibilities will likely find “solutions” by considering the role of handheld technologies in classrooms. Who will tap into that potential for education?

With MySpace, Facebook, and now Twitter, it is clear that humanity is interested in being connected with each other and with ideas. Social networking is a driving force in students’ lives and increasingly in business, with services such as LinkedIn.[13] Schools are the void in between. We know from research that when students put their ideas into words, they have more sophisticated thinking and they retain ideas better. Teachers want students to discuss ideas, such as parallels between Obama and Lincoln, the meaning in the poems of Whitman, the value of approaching a science lab or math problem from different perspectives. Perhaps innovative educators might find ways to solve the constraints of classroom conversation by tapping into social networking.

You tell me it’s the institution. Well, you know, you better free your mind instead.

As teachers (including myself) and administrators curse cell phones and create rules banning them from classrooms, for the justifiable reason that they can distract from learning, perhaps there is another angle to be explored. The authors of Promoting Transformative Innovation in Schools suggest that in education:

“...there is a need for transformative innovation in order to develop new relationships and ways of working, to update approaches, and to harness the collective social capital and skills of school communities to deliver better learning and teaching. This means challenging accepted practice and prevailing logic, which can place practitioners outside their comfort zone, as many changes that innovations may bring can often be disruptive and challenging in the short term.”[14]

What kinds of innovations will truly make learning different, more engaging and effective? It is worth taking some risks. Particularly as new technologies evolve outside the classroom, teachers might consider how they could be used inside the classroom for different purposes. It might take something like, “Okay, everyone get out your cell phones…”

Of course, there are obstacles to being innovative. Chief among them is the digital divide. However, many math classrooms were furnished with sets of graphing calculators when the price became justifiable and the potential for learning became apparent. Figure out what impact
you can have on learning, and the tools will become available. That’s where the grants come in. And grant proposals are more powerful when you join with others engaging in the same exploration. Another pitch for social networking…

So here’s to you innovators out there. It is an exciting time for educators because the possibilities are immense with these emerging technologies. Social networking is possibly one of the keys to not only increasing the thoughtfulness of students but also facilitating collaboration between teachers and connecting teachers to interesting new perspectives. You are not alone in working toward the revolution!

Endnotes


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3 THOUGHTS ON “YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION, WELL, YOU KNOW…”

Tracie Pressler  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:13 PM said:  

Hey there and thanks on your info

christian ministry mooresville  
on February 5, 2014 at 5:18 PM said:  

Hello, I read your new stuff daily. Your story-telling style is awesome, keep up the good work!

christian ministry questionnaire  
on February 5, 2014 at 7:10 PM said:  

This is a topic which is close to my heart… Take care!  
Where are your contact details though?