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How to Spark Innovation

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What do tech-savvy teachers do during summer break? If you're thinking about top technology innovators from around the world, they're sharing, networking and seeking best practices. Tech leaders know that collaboration and sharing are key to student success and great teaching. Reaching beyond the walls of our home school and creating relevant learning environments for tech-savvy kids is crucial for our own growth as well as that of our students.

Susan Patrick, the now former director of educational technology for the U.S. Department of Education, recently shared some alarming statistics: Only 68 percent of American students graduate from high school and just 26 percent of those who go on to college make it to their sophomore year.

"We are so trapped in the memory of what school was like for us," Patrick said. "When we were students, the world outside of school looked like the world inside school. Now, it does not." If you're reading this article, you are painfully aware of the need for lifetime and work place relevance for all learning. Technology integration must make sense to our students and prepare them for future success.

"The paper-based system does not make any sense to kids who are coming up in school," Patrick added. "Is our educational system geared toward innovation? Do we want an 18th-century model or a 21st-century model for our schools? The 18th-century model is the one we have now. The ed-tech community loves the term 'integration.' But our schools need transformation, not integration." We don't need these negative statistics thrown our way. We know where we want to head. The key is for us to communicate, share and collaborate. Just as those skills lead to future success for our students, they are the tools that will help us to provide the best learning environment we can.

Recently, more than 90 teachers from around the world, including twelve from the US, gathered at Microsoft's Innovative Technology Teachers' conference in Redmond, WA to share their transformational strategies. Part of the quest for inspiration and focus for these innovative educators was a keynote by Dr. Yvonne Caamal Canul, Director of the Michigan Dept of Education Office of School Improvement. She posed this question, "Innovation alone is simply a good idea, however, how do we create environments in which innovation can go to scale to be taken on by the whole community. How can you act in the school community so others want to take on your innovation? What kind of environments and leadership lead to innovative development?"

Even our transformational teachers hit roadblocks as they strive for innovative excellence. Dr. Caamal Canul shared insights: Environments that foster innovation have basic characteristics

1. Relationships
    a. Everyone is a potential ally, everything is a potential spark.
    b. Find your authentic self, be human and let people see you laugh and play.
    c. Lead from what is within you.

d. Merely doing the idea but not connecting at a personal level will not germinate.
e. People care if you care about what they know (key genius in the student mentoring).
f. Your sphere of influence is symbiotic. What you give you get (positive energy brings in positive energy).
g. Incorporate the agenda of others into your agenda. Get your innovation into their hands.
h. Build an expansive constituency base. Empower others.

Her keynote included this gem: Students that are empowered equals your power and success. Bring the students into the process with you. Judging by the group's response to Oregon teacher, Heather Renz, as she presented her student-mentor-driven Generation FIT presentation, this resonated soundly with the technology innovators. Dr. Caamal Canul implored the group to, " Create an environment in which the extraordinary becomes ordinary." Heather Renz has done exactly that.

Renz created a team of fourth grade fitness-technology mentors. This team of ten students consisted of a diverse group, including some with behavior challenges, need for more academic success in reading and math, need for more family engagement and school attendance, need for leadership and self confidence. The technology tool the mentors managed for their entire class was a dance mat game called In The Groove.

Talk about transformation, relevant to life and a 21 st century model—this technology application provided rich learning based on key and recent research. We know there is a critical need for kids to have more aerobic fitness, but often we rely on heart rate monitors or pedometers as the "PE technology" piece. Renz's student mentors managed a technology tool that provided exactly that and much more. In The Groove is a video game that uses the entire body on a dance mat controller. Kinesthetic learners and students with special needs soared. They eagerly practiced movement patterns that required eye tracking, prediction and patterning.

Teachers don't have the time to manage all the learning incentives they'd like to share. Technology tools make innovation and transformation easier. Add to that the bonus of the students leading their learning and you've got a recipe for success. Students created a new school culture that generated powerful identity and pride. Renz's students, especially her most challenged learners, identified with their work in a concrete and tangible way. This energy created community buy-in from others throughout Vern Patricl Elementary and enhanced innovation.

Technology innovators are often risk-takers. You must know who you are, what your passion is and what drives you. Take Tomochiro Yamamoto and her project, "Connecting School Home and Community on the Internet." Using tools like cell phones for students seeking information from the field and TV conference systems to go out to fire stations, community and business exploration from within the school, she connects students to the real world. Students set up a Web camera at a distance location; then from within the school they can ask questions and interact.

Community Partners can feel more at home at the school via web conferencing. Students and the business partners can have give and take communication that often connects community need with student expertise. One example is that children can create commercials to aid local business partners using Windows Moviemaker and storyboards. It's no surprise that this partnership created a change in attitudes about school after using TV conference system. Skills developed eagerly by the students included:

1. Communication
2. E-mail
3. Gathering information
4. Shooting and editing video

5. Cooperation

Tapping into the passion of the technology teacher and the students can create powerful and self motivating learning opportunities. Such a program is fired up by the love of sports, especially basketball, at Winnipeg Tec Voc School ITS program of Information Technology Studies. The school is committed to work with its community to facilitate the growth and development of students who will be adaptive lifelong learners succeeding in a rapidly changing world.

Using a blend of authentic learning, teamwork, student leadership and problem solving, a team of students broadcast their basketball games across the building and beyond, so parents at home and relatives from across the country can view the basketball games and their students in action.

According to teacher David Bergen, in this project, the teacher's role is facilitator. As with any broadcast situation, in any project using technology — there will be glitches. Students use peers for solutions, discover their own solutions and innovate their own analysis of the problem. Now *that* is transformation of the learning process.

Integrating new technology into the classroom requires training for teachers as well as students. The Edmonds School District has created a model program for peer-to-peer technology instruction. Microsoft has licensed the program and is using it around the world in places as far away as Brazil and Indonesia. At Oak Heights Elementary, in Edmond, Washington, teacher Susan Scanlon served as a coach for fellow teacher Terri Jean Smith. They worked together to find creative ways to use technology to enhance their learning environments. Their collaboration led to the development of the "Washington State Community Leader Project" where their fourth-grade students used the power of the Internet to contact leaders such as Governor Christine Gregoire, Superintendent Nick Brossoit, and U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell. Students learned how to write and send Emails and how to use multimedia software to prepare exciting reports. Fourth-grader Gerrelan Balarbar researched Congressman Jay Inslee's background and created a PowerPoint presentation about him, which she showed to her classmates by projecting it onto a big screen with the help of a document presenter.

What can you do to increase the transformational impact you have on both your students and your peers?

1. Lead from the passion that is naturally within you.
2. Connect at a personal level with others to germinate and spread your impact.
3. Take time to listen to the passion and discover the expertise in others, including peers and students.
4. Listen to the mission and what your school/faculty values. If your passion can align with the larger goals you will gain both support and power.
5. Build relationships. Take the time with that process for long term and far-reaching results.
6. The more relationships you have, the broader your reach will be.

Dr. Caamal Canul strongly advises, "Incorporate the agenda of others into your agenda. Get your innovation into their hands whenever you can." This shared ownership helps your innovation gain critical mass and momentum. The more you empower others, the more substantial the transformation you can generate.

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