

## Editorial:

# Are We Talking Only to Ourselves? Perhaps!

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In her 2004 article “Technology and Teacher Education: Are We Talking to Ourselves?” Debra Sprague pointed out that in presenting an educational technology agenda there are two general audiences: those within the field of educational technology and those outside the field (read: external stakeholders). The role of these external stakeholders in framing the context of the educational technology agenda, particularly its funding, is likely to increase over the next several years. One of the issues raised in the Sprague article is whether we as educational technologists suitably engage the external stakeholders in meaningful dialogue over the issues that are important to us. In other words, how well does the educational technology community communicate with the external community over the value of its work?

After all, the role of technology as an educational tool is located within a complex system of interrelated groups and organizational structures: politicians and governmental agencies, P-12 educational systems, higher education, profit-making companies, not-for-profit organizations, the public sector, editorial writers and the media, among others. Critical to this set of interrelationships is the funding necessary to allow educational technology to serve as important learning tool. Since public and private funding will remain crucial to the success of the educational technology agenda, advocacy strategies to appropriately leverage essential financial support are important.

At the fall 2006 National Technology Leadership Summit (NTLS) held in Washington, DC, the role of advocacy was at the center of many discussions. In fact, a committee on the topic of Legislative Advocacy spent two days deliberating on how those of us dedicated to the role that technology could play as a meaningful educational tool can be more effective when communicating with key external stakeholders, especially those in the political arena. Many of the ideas developed by that committee are represented in this article.

Cognizant that 2007 would see much deliberation over reauthorization of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), the committee also attempted to distill what are the key features that all stakeholders concerned about education in the 21st century can agree upon. It came up with two characteristics: accountability and global competitiveness. Most agree that a long-standing legacy of NCLB will be a commitment to sustained and appropriate accountability.

Although many hope that future assessment models go beyond the current overreliance on test scores, all seem to agree that even forthcoming education models will embrace accountability. Much attention, particularly in the popular press, has focused recently on the ability of the United States to maintain a competitive role in the emerging 21st century economy and political systems. While we can debate whether the US should seek to remain the dominant player on the world's stage, we can agree that it should do everything possible to prepare its youth to develop the critical skills, literacies, and knowledge to compete in the 21st century world. Obviously, the roles of education and technology are key to developing well-prepared 21st century citizens.

How is it then that Thomas L. Friedman, a popular columnist for the *New York Times* has arguably, with the publication of a single book, done more than hundreds of passionate educators over many years to help people understand the importance of facility with technology as 21st century skill? Many of those deeply concerned about and committed to the role that effective educational technology can play in shaping well-prepared students to become global citizens have only to refer to *The World is Flat* and then eyes roll and heads nod in agreement. It's the economy stupid! How many of us find ourselves, when making the same point that we have for years, come to that key moment that we refer to *The World is Flat* and then people get it?

That leaves us with a couple of options—we can write a seminal bestseller that will be influential across all sectors of society, or we can attempt to incorporate effective advocacy efforts into our professional lives. Based on the work of the Legislative Advocacy Committee NTLs 2006, here are some techniques that can be used to enhance your role as an advocate for key educational issues—and educational technology, in particular. (Suggestions are presented in no special order.)

- **Don't reinvent the wheel**—join and support existing advocacy groups (e.g., the EdTech Action Network, ETAN, <http://www.edtechactionnetwork.org/>). Most of the professional organizations associated with SITE have also formed advocacy or lobbying subcommittees. Find out what is happening in your own associations.
- **Work with local school leaders (e.g., superintendents) and parents groups, (e.g., PTA)**, in developing local and statewide strategies for more effectively implementing educational technology. For example, the combined efforts of a representative from higher education, a school superintendent, and president of a local PTA in speaking on educational issues can be quite powerful.
- **Make an appointment to visit your representative(s)** whenever you are in your state capital or in Washington, DC. Remember, they work for you and are often motivated by hearing from their constituents. Although you may not always get to meet with your state/federal representative or senator, you should at least be able to sit down with the appropriate legislative aide. Be sure always to follow up such visits with a thank you note (and a reminder of the “ask”—see below).
- **Be focused and don't forget the “Ask.”** We are often passionate about the things that are important to us. However, representatives have many constituents asking them to do many things. Specifically, when you meet with your representative, what is it that you want him or her to do? You may want to write down two to three “bullets” and stay focused on them. Likewise, while meeting with important stakeholders on key issues, it is very easy to become passionate about the topic but not ask the person to do anything in particular. If you are meeting about a key piece of legislation, at some point during your discussion be sure to ask your representative to support it.

- **Remember the other side of the aisle.** With the political arena becoming as polarized as it has been in recent years, many of us are more comfortable (and perhaps more familiar with) one political party over the other. Or perhaps, you live in a state or community where one party is clearly the dominant one. When involved in advocacy (or lobbying—see below), you should always maintain ties with both parties. As we saw in November 2006, political winds can shift quite suddenly and dramatically.
- **Have key stakeholders participate in special events.** Whenever possible (and appropriate) invite your congressional representative or the superintendent of your local school district to special events you hold—especially those of a celebratory nature. For example, when having a campus forum on the milestones achieved by a federally funded grant you were awarded, you should invite your local congressperson or senator to attend. They, too, should be joining in the celebration.
- **Compile success stories.** Advocacy is almost always strengthened by actual examples (particularly success stories) of what it is you are advocating for. A classroom teacher's report on student test scores in writing that improved as a result of blogging is much more powerful than simply advocating for the presence of blogging because it is a 21st century tool.
- **Make advocacy efforts part of your professional life.** Most educators belong to professional organizations. Most of those professional organizations have now formed subcommittees devoted to advocacy and lobbying efforts. Find out about such activities and see how you can support them.
- **Understand the difference between “advocacy” and “lobbying.”** All of us are allowed to advocate for the causes we believe in. However, under certain conditions, you may not be allowed to participate in lobbying efforts, which usually involve activities related to particular pieces of legislation or funding initiatives. For example, if you manage a grant, you should be aware of any prohibitions on lobbying. Such a prohibition may prevent you from using grant money to engage in specific lobbying efforts. In practice, the distinction between lobbying and advocacy can be vague. When in doubt, consult your local grants officer or the agency funding your grant. Of course, if you are not using external funding sources to support your efforts, there are few restrictions on your activities.
- **Master the “Elevator” talk.** Imagine if you found yourself on an elevator with an influential congressional representative or senator, what would you say? Remember, you would only have 30-45 seconds to make all your key points. The ideal result of your effectiveness would be that the representative or senator makes an appointment and discusses the issue with you at greater length. As it turns out, most people who are involved in advocacy efforts actually have had just such an experience. They have found themselves in the presence—alone or in a small group—of a very powerful person. Seasoned advocates have actually rehearsed their “elevator speech” and know exactly what to say.

These, of course, are only some of activities in which those committed to advocacy over educational issues can engage. In the end, however, they do allow us to provide some answers to Sprague's question, “Are We Talking to Ourselves?” We can now respond, “No longer. We are talking to others. And we are doing so more effectively!”

## References

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<sup>a</sup>This article represents the combined efforts of all the members of the Legislative Advocacy Committee, National Technology Leadership Summit 2006. Special thanks go to Hilary Goldman, Director of Government Affairs, International Society for Technology in Education, and Jane West, Vice President for Government Relations, American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

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