

# Change from the Radical Center of Education

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While the Radical Center political movement has been around for thirty years, I suggest that leaders in educational technology and school library media programs adopt a similar view on hot button topics. While polarized views of reading methodologies, filtering, DRM, Open Source, copyright/copyleft, constructivism, e-books, computer labs, fixed schedules, Mac/PC/Linux, and the One Laptop Per Child project all make for entertaining reading and a raised blood pressure, I often wonder if radical stances actually create educational change or impact educational institutions enough to change kids' chances of success.

As a radical centrist in education, I subscribe to the following principles:

1. Adopt an "and" not "or" mindset.
2. Look for truth and value in all beliefs and practices.
3. Respect the perspective of the individual.
4. Recognize one size does not fit all (kids or teachers).
5. Attend to attitudes.
6. Understand that the elephant can only be eaten one bite at a time.
7. 7. Make sure everyone is moving forward, not just the early adopters.
8. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
9. Believe measurement is good, but that not everything can be measured.
10. Know and keep your core values.

Let me explain...

## 1. Adopt an "and" not "or" mindset.

*"The answer to most multiple-choice questions is Yes." Walt Crawford*

Believe it or not, there are a lot of people with very strongly held opinions. It seems like I'm always reading or hearing a good deal of either/or type thinking.

- Separate or integrated tech/info lit curriculum
- Encyclopedia Britannica or Wikipedia
- Evolutionary or revolutionary change
- Content knowledge or process skills
- Testing or assessment
- Mandated skills or teacher choice
- Print or online
- Libraries or technology
- Fixed or flex scheduling

It's is this sort of black and white thinking that makes stimulating reading and engenders reader outpourings of love or hate.

I'd encourage you, however, to go back and read an old column by Walt Crawford called "The Dangers of Uniformity" that appeared in the September 2004 *American Libraries* (it's OK tech folks - you won't get cooties reading it). In it he says:

*...why do so many of us look for single solutions to current problems, single technologies, single media? Why do so many writers, futurists, and speakers tout X as "the future" rather than "a part of the future"? I've used the slogan "And, not Or" for more than a decade. There's another slogan that goes along with it, one that I believe to be at least partly true in most walks of life: "The answer to most multiple-choice questions is Yes."*

Walt's philosophy is one worth adopting. Next time you are asked if something should be x or y, try to answer, "Yes, x *and* y."

## **2. Look for truth and value in all beliefs and practices.**

*If you can't stand someone because they can't tolerate others, does that make you hypocritical? If so, should you tolerate their intolerance? AnswerBag*

I find following my own advice here is tough - really tough. My first reaction to people with whom I disagree is to consider them idiots and dope-slap them. Not a course of action approved, I'm sure, by Mother Theresa.

What is difficult to reconcile, however, is that those people I think need to be slapped usually aren't dopes at all. In fact, more than a few are a lot smarter than I am. How does one account for a situation in which two intelligent people disagree? Well...

- One or both could be uninformed about the topic at hand.
- One or both could be misinformed about the topic at hand.
- But most likely, those in disagreement bring different values or perspectives to the topic, thus giving specific facts, experiences or arguments more or less weight. Looking at it this way, *all* evidence ought to be seen as having potential value.

It is dangerous to mistake disagreement for stupidity - or even ignorance. We must listen, learn, and even moderate our own views if we are to retain the Radical Center of Education. In order to find areas of mutual agreement, one needs to keep climbing the abstraction ladder until both parties find a common goal, even if there never is a consensus on the steps needed to reach the goal. (Why, yes, we both want to improve the world. There's something we have in common!)

A related mindset I find difficult not to adopt is assuming a hidden agenda or unstated ulterior motive on another's part. Yes, I certainly do think that those who advocate for school vouchers are actually advocating for the demise of public education, but one can only effectively argue with *stated goals*, not those we devise for others.

Two "sides," each stubbornly and blindly adhering to a single tenet will not result in change. When both sides move to the Radical Center, based on finding mutual values, change is more likely to happen.

## **3. Respect the perspective of the individual.**

*Miles' Law: Where you stand depends on where you sit.*

One of the benefits (or curses) of serving on my school's district-wide committees is learning about the challenges and goals of a variety of employees - classroom teachers, students, principals, librarians, technicians, maintenance staff, clerks, and paraprofessionals. A number of our committees have parents and other citizens as members. What we too often call "turf battles" actually are issues viewed from individual and specific group vantage points - different "frames" to problems, if you will. What makes this interesting is that individual people of good will can have widely differing perspectives.

Budgeting is one area where this is radically apparent. The question of whether more dollars are best spent on library materials, lower class sizes or tuck-pointing brick walls will be answered, legitimately, honestly, and differently, depending on whether it is the librarian, a social studies teacher with classes of 35 kids, or the head of maintenance answering the question.

The issues of digital rights management look very different depending on whether one is a producer or consumer of the creative product. Defining "adequate" network security will depend on whether one is a tech whose life will be made miserable by a virus or a classroom teacher who finds multiple log in screens time-consuming and frustrating. The description of "appropriate" Internet content is certainly depends on one's personal values.

If change is going to happen, the voices of all stakeholders need to be heard. Different doesn't mean right or wrong. It just means different. Daniel Pink in *A Whole New Mind* singles out *empathy* as a critical skill for workers. If I could take steroids for any leadership strength, this is where I would like to bulk up.

#### **4. Recognize one size does not fit all (kids or teachers).**

*Always remember that you are unique. Just like everybody else. - Demotivators*

The goal most requested by parents from our district's 1998 strategic planning was an Individual Education Plan for all students, not just those identified with special needs. How interesting that parents, *even more so than educators*, recognize each child as an individual.

Ecologists talk about the advantages of bio-diversity - a wide variety of living things that create a healthier biome. Why do we not talk more about edu-diversity in our classrooms? (And that differentiated instruction means more than just different reading levels of materials.) Too often when the next great thing - constructivism, technology, whole-language reading instruction, integrated math, data-driven decision-making, professional learning communities, etc. - comes along, it is considered a silver bullet and other methods and philosophies are denigrated and pushed aside. We need to regard the "next great thing" as *another* tool in a big educational utility belt, not the only one of value.

There is no educational strategy (unless it involves some sort of cruelty) that does not work for at least some people under some circumstances. And I would also guess that there is no educational strategy that works with every person every time. An educational monoculture is no healthier than a suburban lawn.

The "one size does not fit all" principle is something we tech and library folks might keep in mind more often when we get enthusiastic about a particular tool or service and then are disappointed when the teaching staff yawns or even defies us. Try as I might, I simply don't "get" why people love cell phones, yet other folks seem to rely on them heavily. I suppose if I expect you to respect my taste in this matter, it behooves me to respect yours as well.

This is why the "and" not "or" mindset is so important. Our educational system needs to be as diverse as the kids and teachers in it.

#### **5. Attend to attitudes.**

*If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right. Henry Ford*

Those of us who wish to maintain the Radical Center of Education need to remember the critical role attitude plays in change efforts - especially those involving technology. If we set about determining whether teachers are using library resources or tech tools well, we need to ask about attitude as well as skills.

I find it amazing (and even a little frustrating) that some teachers can't get enough technology in their classrooms and give their kids enough experiences using it, while other teachers still grumble at even having to

use anything more complicated than an overhead projector. And that I don't think it breaks down neatly along generational lines.

These strategies can help shape teacher attitudes:

- Stress the WIIFM (What's In It For Me) reasons for computer use. Any inservice or new project should have at its heart the clear goal of making a teacher's job easier or providing the kind of exciting learning opportunities that make teaching more enjoyable.
- Give the end user (teacher) a voice in deciding equipment platforms, software adopted, and timelines for implementation. Everybody hates top-down edicts.
- Take a hard look at your inservice times to make sure they are as convenient as possible for teachers. Consider a range of training options that suit individual teacher learning styles. While many people learn well in hands-on, face-to-face training sessions, others may prefer online or video instruction, well-written tutorials, or simply the time and peace needed to learn through experimentation.
- Adjust the attitude of the technology support staff. As all of us help teachers with computer hardware and use problems, are we doing our best in making sure they are respected for the intelligent, loveable people they really are?

Never underestimate the power of attitude.

## **6. Understand that the elephant can only be eaten one bite at a time.**

*Mrs. Weiler's Law: Anything is edible if it is chopped finely enough.*

As much as they may be needed, radical changes in education are less likely than incremental changes. Despite Disraeli's often quoted caveat, "The most dangerous strategy is to jump a chasm in two leaps," stepping too far outside a teacher's or administrator's comfort zone means leaving the Radical Center of Education, and makes long-term, universal change more difficult. And the larger the leap expected to be made in a single bound, the fewer willing to take the chance. And nobody *makes* anybody do anything in education.

The more analogous a technology application is to something the teacher is already doing, the more likely the teacher is to adopt it. Mobile laptop carts - not too popular; interactive white boards - hugely successful.

Vygotsky's proximal development theory holds for adult learners as well as for kids - you've always got to have some old knowledge from which to hang the new learning. Chasm leaping doesn't allow for this; bite-sized elephant eating does. I've never apologized for taking an incremental approach to technology implementation in the classroom. This approach gets teachers actually using the tech to improve the classroom experience, even if it isn't radically overhauling it.

As much as I might like it were otherwise, technology is not really a catalyst for change, but simply a tool for change. It can be an effective and exciting way to help implement best practices driven by the content area research, educational theory, or even state/national mandates, but change shouldn't start with technology.

## **7. Make sure everyone is moving forward, not just the early adopters.**

*To travel fast, travel alone. To travel far, travel with others.*

I thought of the African proverb above after a few blog posts caught my eye:

A tech director recently blogged that

- Checking Email

- Surfing the Internet
- Playing Internet based games
- Word Processing
- Excel Spreadsheets

struck him as outdated. *His* computer use consists of social networking, using wikis, online photo editing and sharing and listing to streaming audio, as well as “crafting video intensive presentations

Most of the activities on this technologist’s list would make my list too, as well as the list of many technology enthusiasts. Yet a 2007 survey shows that “73% of Americans have never heard of *Google Docs*.” I wonder what percent of Americans who have heard of the other applications above? What’s the percentage of teachers who use social networking sites? I’ll be dollars to doughnuts it wouldn’t even be close to 73%.

This disparity between leading edge techs and the average Joe or Jane, leads thoughtful practitioners like Kim Confino from the International School of Bangkok to observe:

*I sometimes need to remind myself that the most critical part of my job to inspire change in the real world, not just within our connected group of educators. The reality is that those of us hoping to be voices of change need to make sure that we’re not speeding ahead on our own, but must always work to bring everyone else in our school environment along with us.*

Speeding ahead is easy to do for those of us interested and invested in technology. But if experience has taught me anything, a school district needs to measure its technological achievements by how the *majority* of its teachers are using technology, not by it’s few shining stars. (Yes, every district has some.)

The Radical Center emphasizes smaller, deeper, more wide-spread, and lasting change through the use of technology. The problem with being too far down the road ahead of the pack is turning around to find that everyone else has taken a different path.

## **8. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."**

*Discussion is an exchange of knowledge; argument is an exchange of ignorance. Robert Quillan*

It’s difficult to admit, but there are darned few things I know for absolutely certain, especially when it comes to technology and education. Thankfully, the older I get, the easier it is for me to say, “I don’t know, but let’s find out.” Try it a couple times. It gets easier.

For some reason, our culture has replaced evidence with volume on too many issues. While it’s very easy to say to those with whom one does not agree that they lack supporting evidence for their position, The Radical Center of Education believes one need to critically view the amount and validity of both (or all) perspectives. Self-examination of one’s own beliefs is necessary for credibility. And to come to consensus on controversial issues, a consensus that vital information is missing (or is unknowable) must be reached.

We have to change the culture of our schools so that asking questions is considered a sign of wisdom, not weakness.

Oh, and it is perfectly reasonable to conclude at times that “the verdict is still out.” Conclusive evidence is not always available.

## **9. Measurement is good, but not everything can be measured.**

*Not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted counts. Einstein*

Donald Norman in his terrific book, *Things That Make Us Smart*, said it well:

*The final result is that technology aids our thoughts and civilized lives, but it also provides a mind-set that artificially elevates some aspects of life and ignores others, not based upon their real importance but rather by the arbitrary condition of whether they can be measured scientifically and objectively by today's tools. Consequently, science and technology tend to deal solely with the products of their measurements, they divorce themselves from the real world. The danger is that things that cannot be measured play no role in scientific work and are judged to be of little importance. Science and technology do what they can do and ignore the rest. They are superb at what they do, but what is left out can be of equal or greater importance.*

We're certainly focused on "empirical evidence" and "evidence-based practice" and testing, testing, testing in our school district. We're devoting tremendous resources (including technology and technology staff) to online testing, value-added testing, data warehousing and data analysis. Perhaps we are overdue in public education for such an accounting. Unfortunately, that which we can measure given the limits of current testing is a very, very small subset of those attributes that make people successful. And we are discounting those programs and activities that do not show a direct bearing on basic, low-level test scores.

Data are good. No question. (I look for numbers that support my point of view all the time.) But we in the Radical Center of Education must remember that "what is left out can be of equal or greater importance" and acknowledge values other than empirical evidence if positive change is to occur. We ought to be giving equal credence to professional experience, anecdotal information, meaningful traditions, and the intrinsic value of activities and programs such as play, sports, the arts, libraries, and storytelling.

The Radical Center of Education honors multiple kinds of evidence, not just data (or just anecdote or just tradition, etc.), and uses them to direct and make change.

## **10. Know and keep your core values.**

*You've Got to Stand For Something (or You'll Fall for Anything) - lyrics by Aaron Tippin*

The Radical Center of Education theory doesn't work unless the person working for change has deeply held values. While Stephen Colbert makes great sport of the know-nothing philosophy of "truthiness," making Radical Center change requires both an open mind and values firmly held by both the heart and the head. Without such values, change is simply change for change sake.

I can't recommend a single source of these values, nor should I expect anyone to adopt my list. I will list a few of my own and encourage you to create your own list.

- The solution to most of the world's problems will rely effective education.
- My best judgments are made when I think of myself first as a child advocate, second as an educator, and lastly as a technologist.
- All kids should be treated the way I want my own grandchildren to be treated.
- Creativity, empathy, and humor are as important to success as reading, writing and numeracy.
- Schools should teach children to think, not to believe.

Your list will be as individual as you are. But know it and act with it in mind.

The author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren, and his wife Kay were being interviewed on National Public Radio's *Speaking of Faith* program. As a couple, they lead a large Evangelical church, but also are working on AIDS prevention. One particular comment by Kay stuck me. She sees her church as a moderate organization, neither fundamentalist nor liberal. And she believes this to be the most difficult position for it to take because it has two sets of critics - those from both the extreme left and the extreme right. Anyone who chooses the Radical Center can count on doubling his/her critics. Be warned.

Change is tough - especially meaningful, lasting and humane change. The Radical Center might be a way to help it actually come about.