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Change agents and change agencies in language education: Implications for LangNet

Richard D. Brecht

There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new order of things.... Whenever his enemies have the ability to attack the innovator they do so with the passion of partisans, while the others defend him sluggishly, so that the innovator and his party alike are vulnerable.

—Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, as quoted in Rogers (1995)

Educational innovation is a richly satisfying enterprise, particularly in an age of rising demands and expanding technology. But unless the innovators have an explicit strategic plan and a dedicated system for diffusing their work, innovation is destined to have little or no impact on the teachers and learners for whom it is intended. That truth lies at the heart of the literature on the diffusion of innovation.

The focus of this chapter is innovation in language learning as represented by LangNet (<http://www.nflc.org/infolangnet/>). LangNet is a new learning-support system that uses a Web-based search and retrieval system to share reusable learning objects. Although the Advanced Distributed Learning Network (<http://www.adlnet.org>) and the IMS Global Learning Consortium (<http://www.imsproject.org>) provide technical and content standards for “interoperability of applications and services in distributed learning”—as noted on the IMS site—LangNet remains the only comprehensive and substantive embodiment of the learning-objects approach to the teaching and learning of languages. As such, it stands as the primary vehicle for diffusion of this remarkable educational reform strategy, which takes full advantage of the World Wide Web to provide customizable learning on demand.

LangNet is being developed as a collaborative initiative of the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC), national language teachers’ associations,

and federal agencies concerned with language education. With initial funding from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), LangNet is designed to align language learning resources with the learning needs of students, allowing language learning to be tailored to specific types of learners and even to individual learners. LangNet facilitates the application of resources to language learning through the delivery to teachers and learners of three key LangNet products:

- *Diagnostics* that determine the learning needs of learners and teachers
- *Learning plans* that help students progress from one level of proficiency to the next
- *Sharable learning resources* appropriate to the user being served.

Innovation diffusion

According to Everett Rogers (1995), innovation diffusion requires a clear mindset or intent, adequate knowledge and understanding of the process of diffusion, and an active diffusion network, the sole purpose of which is the institutionalization of innovation.

Any innovation diffusion system can be broken down into the following parts:

- *Change agency*. A change agency is an institution whose function is to initiate, support, and institutionalize beneficial change for its *client system*. In the language world, the national teachers' associations constitute the traditional change agencies. In the world of higher education, FIPSE is the quintessential change agency.
- *Client system*. The clients of educational innovation are, of course, learners and teachers, as well as the makers of education policy. The teachers represent the primary target of innovation, as they constitute the primary gatekeepers in the system.
- *Change agent*. "A change agent is an individual who influences clients' innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency" (Rogers 1995, 335). Change agents bridge the "social and technological chasms between the change agency and the client system" (336). They are

administrators, researchers, and teachers who are keenly aware of the shortcomings of the language education system, deeply committed to reform, and broadly knowledgeable about education, technology, and language learning.

- *Innovator*. The role of the innovator is “that of launching the new idea in the system or importing the innovation from outside of the system’s boundaries. Thus the innovator plays a gatekeeping role in the flow of new ideas into a system” (Rogers 1995, 264). For the most part, the innovators in the language community are the teachers who are determined to improve their students’ performance by looking beyond the narrow confines of their classroom.
- *Developers*. Finally, or course, there are the innovation developers, the people who actually design, develop, and implement innovative programs, materials, and technologies. In language they are theorists and practitioners who come from the formal education system, from the government language-education network, and from private-sector publishing and training.

The leaders of FIPSE-sponsored programs arguably constitute the best sample of educational change agents, innovators, and developers in this country, with the latter two roles dominant. The problem is that the education community is getting quite good at supporting innovators, but the roles of change agent and change agency are still as vaguely developed as they are crucial to change and reform in language education. The challenge is to improve innovation diffusion by strengthening the roles of the change agent and change agency.

The change agencies associated with LangNet are FIPSE, the NFLC, the national language teachers’ associations, and the Defense Language Institute—all looking to institute a new mode of cost-effective, quality assured, and learner responsive language learning and instruction.

The challenge of being a change agent

Rogers distinguishes two abiding characteristics of change agents: social marginality and information overload. Social marginality characterizes the

inevitable gulf between the change agent and the client system: “As a bridge between two differing system,” writes Rogers, “the change agent is a marginal figure with one foot in each of two worlds.” Making this gulf even more difficult to bridge is the change agent’s chronic information overload. Change agents usually are so infused with information and enthusiasm that communication inevitably breaks down because “excessive communication inputs cannot be processed and utilized” (336).

These deficits notwithstanding, the change agent’s role is crucial. Stated in a form condensed from Rogers, change agents are responsible for defining systemic needs and identifying clients’ motivations, developing a clear strategy for change, implementing the change process, and institutionalizing the change in the client system.

The change agent’s initial task is to identify points of leverage—that is, the positive and negative motivations for change in the system.

The clearest need of language teachers and administrators today to respond to growing demands for true language competence. It is a paradox that the nation’s chronic failure to appreciate the need for language ability persists in the face of that growth. Despite rising demand from government and business, educators must repeatedly make the case for language programming to state governments, university administrations, and students.

Above all, teachers and learners seek programming that is better, faster, and cheaper. Better in the sense of providing more appropriate instruction to an ever broader range of students and taking students to higher, more professionally usable proficiency levels. Faster and cheaper by providing distributed learning and distance education grounded in networks and supported by technology.

We have said that change agents must have a clear understanding of teachers’ and learners’ motivations, both positive and negative, for instituting change. For language teachers, the incentives for change are the same as for most other teachers: promotion, prestige, salary, and savings of time and effort. For learners the common motivations are effectiveness, convenience, and cost. The professional teachers’ associations that act as change agents for LangNet

guarantee an understanding of programming needs and motivations for change within the LangNet system.

Developing an innovation diffusion strategy for language education

The next step in the innovation diffusion process is the development of a plan for creating, in Rogers's words, "intent in the client for change and translating that intent to action." This requires an understanding not only of client needs and motivations, but also of the context for change and its applications.

For the language field, such contextual understanding must start with the work of visionaries. In education those visionaries include Howard Gardner (*Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*), Niel Postman (*The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*), and controversial critics like Lewis J. Perelman (*School's Out: A Radical New Formula for the Revitalization of American's Educational System*). In technology they include Tim Berners-Lee (*Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web*), Ray Kurzweil (*The Age of Spiritual Machines*), and Michael Dertouzos (*The Unfinished Revolution: Human-Centered Computers and What They Can Do for Us*). In language learning one thinks of the latest North East Conference publication, *Beyond the Boundaries: Changing Contexts in Language Learning*, among many others.

In addition to basing their diffusion strategy on the work of visionaries, would-be change agents in the language field must be aware of the leading edge of basic and applied research in second-language acquisition (SLA), instructional and informational technology, education and educational policy, and psychology and cognition (for instance, the National Research Council's recent publication, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*).

The conference that produced this volume brought together some of the leading experts in SLA to paint a picture of the state of the art of language learning and teaching in the areas most critical to the enterprise, areas that must be well understood if innovation is to take root and spread. Those areas include the learner, curriculum, assessment, technology, faculty development, and articulation of language education from kindergarten to college.

Any successful change strategy must also be vetted in discussions with focus groups of learners and teachers to determine their reactions to the proposed innovation. Too many proponents of innovation are content to proceed without empirical evidence for or against dissemination. Other vetting should involve policy leaders from the national teachers' and presidential associations in the language and education fields as well as organizations concerned with accreditation, certification, and licensure.

In LangNet the vetting process is facilitated through the involvement of the professional language teachers' associations, which appoint their leading scholar-pedagogues to oversee the quality of the system's learning plans and "sharable learning objects." The LangNet staff has visited many campuses to conduct focus groups concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness the innovations offered by LangNet.

Translating strategy into change

To implement LangNet's innovative ideas, the language education field needs what Rogers calls "opinion leaders" and "innovators." The opinion leaders in the language business are the leading SLA researchers, association heads, deans and provosts, and editors and publishers of the leading journals and pedagogical materials. The innovators usually are faculty members sprinkled in programs around the country who have the knowledge and aptitude to identify and adopt innovation. Most often they teach in schools known for their willingness to experiment, in elite schools with the resources to innovate, in community colleges that are traditionally driven by the constantly changing needs of their students, and in continuing education programs similarly needful of being responsive to adult learners.

From its beginnings LangNet has called on the national teachers' associations to form national boards of scholar-pedagogues to advise LangNet. LangNet has been presented before national meetings of educational associations (American Association of Colleges and Universities, American Council on Education); funding organizations (FIPSE, National Security Education Program, and the U.S. Department of Education's Title VI/Fulbright-Hays network); federal language agency meetings (Interagency Language Roundtable); national language organizations (American Council on

the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Modern Language Association, and National Council of Organizations of Less Commonly Taught Languages); and the national organizations for many individual languages.

Another vital step in the implementation of innovation is the establishment and maintenance of what Rogers calls an “information exchange network” to which would-be innovators can turn for information on how to apply the innovations that excite them. Most important is information about those qualities of the innovation that are vital for its adoption, such as:

- Its relative advantage—how it is better, faster, or cheaper than the idea it supersedes.
- Its compatibility—how it is “consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” (Rogers 1995, 224). In the language field, this might mean that the innovation was proficiency based, learner oriented, and consistent with the notion of the language learning career.
- Its complexity, or how difficult it is to understand and use.
- Its susceptibility to trials and experiments of limited scope.
- Its observability, or how clear its results will be to others. Observability is a problem for any curricular change, as improvement, particularly at the more advanced levels, is extremely difficult to discern, let alone document with existing testing instruments.

LangNet is designed to meet Rogers’s requirements for an effective information exchange network.

- First, its relative advantage is that it enables more responsive programming, including support of learning and instruction at the superior/distinguished level, a rarity in the language field.
- Second, LangNet’s learning plans are based on fieldwide standards that are recognized by all and compatible with existing values.
- Third, it is simple to use a LangNet diagnostic tool to produce an appropriate learning plan and related resources, even though that tool was very complex to produce.

- Fourth, LangNet can be used to add value to an existing course. It does not require major reform or replacement of existing programming.
- Fifth, the ultimate goal of LangNet is to provide each learning plan and even each sharable learning object with an assessment component, so that users can assess whether the learning task has been mastered.

The last requirement for effective diffusion is that the innovation be supported by demonstration sites, both *experimental* (to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovation) and *exemplary* (to facilitate diffusion through effective, confident, and highly visible programming). In addition, a rigorous process of faculty and learner development must be implemented. Often ignored, learner development must include clear support for self-management on the part of the learner.

FIPSE is currently funding a limited LangNet demonstration project involving the University of Maryland and Northern Virginia Community College. The project has taken on several federal language-teaching programs as demonstrations and is looking to add other campuses and schools.

Institutionalizing change

According to Rogers, change is institutionalized when the client system takes genuine ownership of the innovation. Although individuals and institutions can own an innovation—in the sense of treating it as their responsibility and a source of pride and identity—mass adoption and continuance are best ensured through ownership by the language field itself through the publications, Web sites, conferences, workshops, and summer seminars of its national teachers' associations. In addition to these traditional means, each association should establish an innovation diffusion network with an integrated business plan for long-term maintenance.

LangNet aspires to be a permanent part of the language learning landscape, sustained by the professional organizations and their members. The sustaining business plan revolves about the notion of an “information intermediary.” As defined by Hagel and Singer (1999), the role of the “infomediary” is to “help customers capture, manage, and maximize the value” of information about themselves.

The quintessential innovation diffusion network is the agricultural extension service, which takes innovation—produced through university research and corporate research and development—and diffuses it through extension specialists and county extension agents specializing in agriculture, home economics, and youth. The extension subject-matter specialists in state schools of agriculture interpret current research findings to extension agents, and thus to clients (Rogers 1995, 360).

A permanent system designed for the specific purpose of innovation diffusion, the extension service works with local farm bureaus and with state and national organizations. The equivalent in the language field would have as its local change agents teachers at all levels of education interacting with university-based, discipline-specific specialists to move innovation from researchers to teachers and learners in every locality in the country.

In LangNet, the national boards of scholar-pedagogues who interact with faculty at the demonstration sites would serve as the extension specialists, while the national associations would build a national network of local change agents.

Conclusion

The development and promotion of innovation have become more widespread and systematic in language education, as in education as a whole, due largely to the growth of information and instructional technology. The abiding difficulty in innovation is its diffusion, a problem that has vexed funders for years and continues to receive attention from agencies like FIPSE. It may be time for FIPSE and other change agencies to consider building an educational equivalent to the agricultural extension service—an educational extension service—to diffuse education innovation nationwide. Such a national resource would support discipline-specific innovation diffusion systems like LangNet at the NFLC and RussNet at the American Council of Teachers of Russian.

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