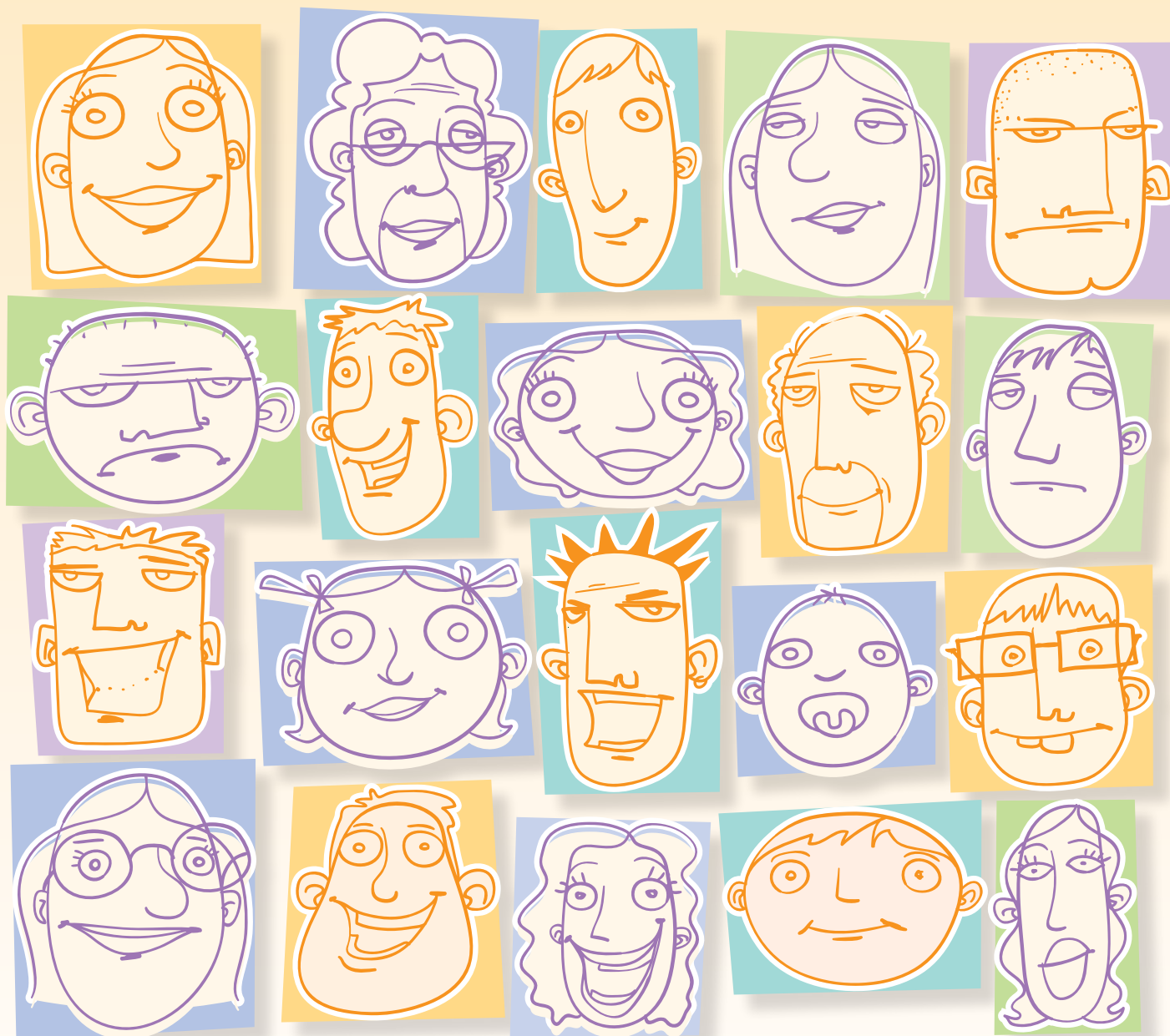


By Helen Soulé

Transforming School Communities

Creating Dialogue Using Web 2.0 Tools



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The proverb, “He who leads without any followers is just taking a walk,” states a universal truth that is sometimes forgotten in the hectic routines of school leaders. Each day education leaders struggle to transform schools of industrial age classrooms to 21st-century learning environments where modern pedagogy and technology engage students in successful learning journeys. Building support and commitment for such a transformation requires solid communication strategies and smart use of effective tools. And it is not easy. New Web 2.0 tools are uniquely suited to the task of building this type of support externally and internally. While their use is in its infancy, they deserve serious consideration by leaders who do not want to “walk alone.”

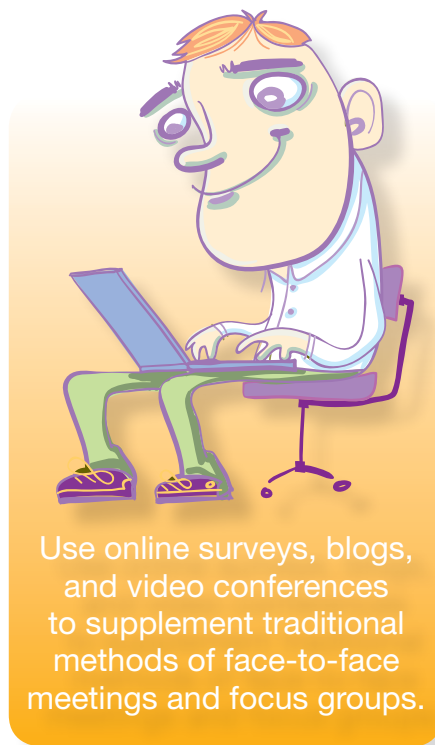
Effective communication is one of the most important, most overlooked and least understood areas of school leadership. It is the glue holding the district and community together and must be more than a one-way dialogue. Three increasingly critical components of communication are:

- advocacy of the vision
- networking to build formal and informal support
- collaboration with diverse external and internal constituencies

Web 2.0 tools should be an important part of every district’s communication strategy, creating environments for collaboration in ways never possible before. Most of them are free, inexpensive, easy to use, and require little set up. When combined with basic communication principles and careful planning, they can expand a district’s reach, increase dialogue, and improve community support.

Familiarize Yourself with the Tools

Where can education leaders begin? First, get acquainted with the Web 2.0 tools, then incorporate them with your district’s communication plans. Many good blogs, podcasts, and resources are available, with more appearing each day. Begin searching and researching; join or start a blog; experiment with podcasting; and make your district Web site interactive. If you need help, the online tools at Iowa State University’s CASTLE project can set up blogs for principals at no charge. Already, more than 150 principals have accepted that offer. (See resources on page 15.)



Send a Clear Message

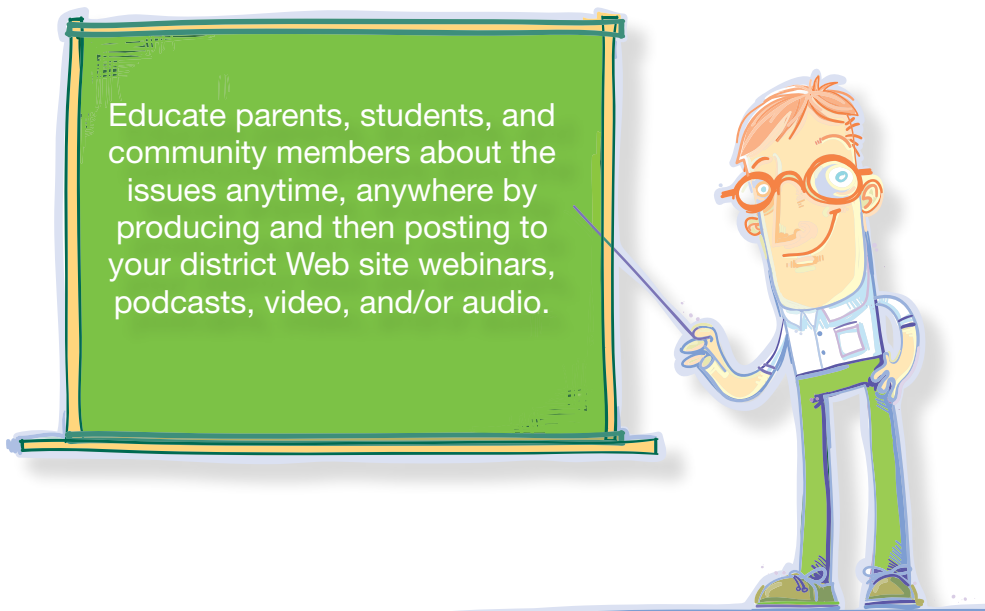
Next, consider the clarity of message. Whether as expansive as the vision for transformation or as detailed as a bus schedule, the message is often at issue

in school districts. Minimize confusion by being consistent, using easy-to-understand language and making everyday analogies that resonate with the audience. Blogs are particularly helpful, as they are usually focused on a particular topic and can combine text, images, video, Web pages, and other links to articulate, explain, and clarify. By enabling the community to post reactions and comments, one can quickly see if the message is understood and take advantage of the instantaneous nature of the technology to clarify quickly any misconceptions.

Many administrators shy away from blogs because of perceived loss of control of the message. Remember: Blogging communities often police themselves. Blogs can be moderated, and inappropriate posts and bloggers can be denied access. However, education leaders should not rely on strict measures of control, but rather use the tools to their advantage.

Know the Audience

To understand diverse education constituencies is a complex task, yet it is a critical one. The audience may be as large as the external community or the faculty, or as small as the school board president or a parent. Use multiple vehicles to gather constituency input and gain an understanding of their attitudes, preferences, and ideas. Use online surveys, blogs, and video conferences to supplement traditional methods of face-to-face meetings and focus groups. Collect information from a wider community, including “silent” community members with no children in school, but who wield powerful influence. Are they listed on Facebook? Do they watch the nightly news? Do they use instant messaging



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or e-mail? Learn the habits of your constituents, and then customize communications for each audience.

Match Vehicle, Audience, and Message

The obvious next, often-forgotten step is to match the vehicle, audience, and message. While the basic message should not change, it is perfectly permissible and smart to tailor that message to the audience and adapt it for the communication vehicle. Each one has unique characteristics suitable to particular messages and audiences.

This is especially true of Web 2.0 tools. An excellent example is an international school's efforts to reach its alumni. Because alumni live all over the world and move often, efforts to remain connected are difficult, at best.

As an experiment, the alumni coordinator created a Facebook page to reach out to former students. The results have been astounding. Searches on Facebook have found several formerly lost alumni. Furthermore, because students are accustomed to connecting with others on Facebook, many have found the school online and reached out to it. While schools use traditional methods also, Facebook efforts have been surprisingly successful.

Create Opportunities to Educate

Communication is part education. Often opposition to a new idea comes

from a lack of understanding of the problem and/or the solution. Educate parents, students, and community members about the issues anytime, anywhere by producing and then posting to your district Web site webinars, podcasts, video, and/or audio.

One creative elementary school principal spent a day touring his school, chronicling the day by taking pictures and video to record what teachers and students were doing. Then, he posted them—including links to class resources, pictures, podcast interviews, information and reflection—to his blog on his district's Web site. Parents, students, and the community were thrilled. It opened the doors of the school to the whole community and educated them, with very positive results.

Use Multiple Vehicles

Be creative! It is insufficient to send messages home only in student backpacks. In many families, both parents work and expect reliable, clear, regular, and prompt communications. Publish information in multiple formats across several platforms to increase the chances that the message will reach the intended audience. Everything distributed in print (newsletters, calendars, strategic plans, etc.) should also be available on the district/school Web site and/or via e-mail. Build a parent portal on the district's Web site to share information efficiently.

Make Way for Interaction

One-way communication systems are no longer viable in the classroom, the superintendent's office, or the school board room. Parents, students, teachers, and community members must be involved in vision and transformation of school to survive the inertia of status quo. This is where the Web 2.0 tools excel. Blogs and online-discussion boards allow for community input and discussion. A moderator can keep the conversation on-topic and professionally oriented. Webcasts and teleconferences should always allow time for audience questions, and can accommodate pre-submitted questions or real-time questioning, where appropriate. Doing so allows people to react to ideas in multiple venues and encourages them to participate in solutions.

Verify whether your district Web site has tools in place for two-way communication. There are plenty of ways to invite participation. A quick scan of district Web sites around the country reveals a few approaches:

- complete a survey on attitudes about a new program
- e-mail a teacher, principal, or administrator
- view a podcast of the board meeting
- submit a question for the town hall meeting
- sign up for e-newsletters, volunteer for school
- check student schedules, assignments, and grades
- consult—and add information to—the master calendar
- ask a technical support question
- post to a school blog

Web 2.0 tools are especially helpful in the three areas of transforming communications: advocacy, networking, and collaboration.

Advocate the Vision

While the dictionary defines *advocacy* as the act of arguing in favor of, or

supporting something, it is often informally referred to as “making the case” or “telling the story.” Traditionally, educators shy away from advocacy because it seems to be too closely linked with the forbidden “lobbying.”

However, this is an era of unprecedented accountability, and education leaders must advocate to educate others, and to build knowledge, trust, and a culture that is open to change. Advocacy can be as simple as developing case studies, best practice videos, or testimonies of teachers and then adding them to Web sites, blogs, and podcasts.

Network to Build Support

Networking is often dismissed as socializing, yet it is critical to build and maintain a functioning, supportive community. For those comfortable with building formal and informal business networks, it is an easy task. Yet for many, it takes deliberate effort and creative use of the newest technologies. The popularity of Facebook and MySpace are evidence of the growing importance of networking. Think they are just for the kids? Try the more professional networks, such as LinkedIn or ISTE Island on Second Life. These Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) are springing up everywhere on the Web, allowing even the most isolated teachers and administrators to learn from each other.

Networking through technology can form powerful alliances, connecting leaders and experts locally, nationally and internationally. Have a new idea that you want to float or a problem to solve? Post it to your blog, or connect with your network and start a dialogue. Remember: anytime, anywhere information can work to your advantage. (See Resources for some blogs written by principals.)

Collaborate with Constituents

Web 2.0 tools give the concept of collaboration new life. In the 1980s, attempts at collaboration using telephony were difficult and clumsy. Today, networks are fast and ubiquitous, while collaborative tools are smart and inexpensive, making true collaboration possible. Voice-over-Internet applications such as Skype, coupled with inexpensive “eyeball” cameras, make distance meetings auditory, visual, and substantive. Documents, videos, and presentations can be uploaded to a central location such as Google Docs and shared with all participants to facilitate discussion.

It is time for district and education leaders to begin using Web 2.0 tools at the organizational level, strategically building them into their communication plans. Using Web 2.0 tools as a key part of the district communication strategy, school leaders will not have to walk alone on their path to

creating 21st-century learning environments. The tools, together with solid communication basics, careful planning, and of course, a little courage can create a culture of openness, support, understanding, and success.

Resources

Blogs

Borelli, Jan: *Dr. Jan's Blog*: http://www.drjansblog.com/dr_jans_blog
 CASTLE (Iowa State University's Center for Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education): <http://www.schooltechleadership.org>
Principal Blogging Project: <http://principalblogs.jot.com/WikiHome>
Blogs for Busy Administrators: <http://www.schooltechleadership.org/administratorblogs>
School Law Blogs: <http://www.schooltechleadership.org/schoollawblogs>
 Christophersen, Kelly: *Educational Discourse*: <http://kwhobbes.wordpress.com>
 Johnson, Jeanette: *From the Principal's Desk*: <http://principalblogs.typepad.com/jeanettejohnson>
Leader Talk: <http://www.leadertalk.org>
 Lehmann, Chris: *Practical Theory: A View from the Classroom*: <http://www.practicaltheory.org/serendipity/>
 McLeod, Scott: *Dangerously Irrelevant*: <http://www.dangerouslyirrelevant.org>
 Millmann, Matt: *The Chatfield Connection*: <http://www.principalblogs.typepad.com/matthillmann>
 Perdaems, Linda: *The Woodland Brag Blog*: <http://www.principalblogs.typepad.com/lindaperdaems>
 Sherman, Dave: *The Principal and Interest*: <http://blog109.org/communities/dsherman/default>

Podcasts

International Society for Technology in Education: <http://www.iste.org/Content/Miller,MelindaandScottElias:ThePracticalPrincipals>: <http://practicalprincipals.net/NavigationMenu/Membership/Podcasts>

Publication

Schrum, L. and Solomon, G. (2007). *Web 2.0: New Tools, New Schools*. ISTE.



Helen Soule, PhD, is a longtime educator, having served at the local, state, and national levels for the past 25 years. Currently, she is an independent consultant, assisting the education community in building strong, 21st-century learning environments. She is a past ISTE board member and treasurer.

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