

The Diffusion of a Technological Innovation:

Newsela as a Technological Tool in the Elementary Classroom

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#### **Summary**

I interviewed an elementary school principal at a different school than the one I work at, but in the same school district. I decided to interview this particular principal because he implemented a technology at his school site last school year that we are implementing at our school site this year. The technology being discussed in the interview is called Newsela. The principal I interviewed described Newsela as an online tool that has current event articles in different content areas.

The interview started with a description of Newsela and then a description of the setting in which Newsela was introduced. He described the school as a k-5 elementary school with about 750 students who are mostly of low socio-economic status. He also described the school as a Title I school, which is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2015) as “schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families...” The school has limited technology devices available, with only 1 computer lab of 60 computers and 1 cart with 35 laptops to be shared with 750 students.

The rest of the interview was dedicated to the diffusion of Newsela at the elementary school discussed. In summary, Newsela has been diffused for about one year at the school and not all teachers have adopted. Only about half of the 2-5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers are using regularly and there are still those teachers who continue to reject Newsela. The principal has some ideas that he would like to execute in the hopes of getting more teachers to adopt Newsela as a technology tool in their classrooms.

### **Interview Analysis**

Based on the responses in the interview, the principal I interviewed seems to have a view of technology similar to Feenberg's (2002) explanation of the Instrumental Theory. According to Feenberg (2002) the Instrumental theory is the theory that "offers the most widely accepted view of technology" and it is based on the idea that "technologies are "tools" standing ready to serve the purposes of their users" (p. 5). The principal I interviewed sees Newsela as a neutral tool for the classroom when he stated, "I thought that Newsela would be a great tool to use with struggling students."

I believe that this principal has the same view as many other principals and other educators in the public school system. The principal is looking for different "tools" that will help teachers teach content more effectively and get students prepared for state assessments such as the SBAC, or Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Just like the principal at my school site, the principal I interviewed believes that Newsela is just another great technological tool that will get students to think critically and become more successful. This viewpoint is by no means a bad one because the goal is to help students learn and get good grades.

In regards to the diffusion of the technology Newsela, the principal has decided to tap into the communication channels as a next step. Rogers (2003) defines a communication channel as "the means by which messages get from one individual to another" (p. 18). By having the non-adopters observe adopters using Newsela in the classroom, he is using "interpersonal channels" as a way to try to diffuse Newsela further and convince non-adopters to become adopters.

### **Reflection**

The interview I conducted was very interesting and insightful for me. It helped me get an idea of where the diffusion of Newsela is going at my school site. Since the school site I work at is very similar to that of the principal I interviewed so I feel that the diffusion process may go very similar. I agree with the Instrumental theory viewpoint that the principal has of Newsela being a useful tool in the classroom because I too believe that it will help prepare students for state assessments by providing non-fiction articles which students can manipulate online, very similar to the way it is presented on the SBAC assessment.

However, after reading Feenberg's (2002) article, I also think that Newsela will change the dynamics of the classroom. Students at our school site are used to reading textbooks and answer questions about them on paper and pencil. With this innovation, students can manipulate the text and answer questions directly on the computer. This ties into the Substantive theory stating that "technology constitutes a new cultural system" (p. 6). The classroom's cultural system is changed when Newsela is introduced. During my interview, however, I did not impose this viewpoint because I believe that both are correct.

By conducting this interview, I was able to get a better understanding of the diffusion process. I also learned that the diffusion of a technology is never really complete as long as you can find different ways of trying to reach those non-adopters. The easiest part of this assignment was the interview process. The principal I interviewed was very open about his views on technology and the diffusion process as it applied to his work setting. The most difficult part was the analysis of the interview because I believe that it is subjective to the interpretation of those

who read the responses of the interview. However, it was very beneficial for me to review the interview responses and analyze it using the various readings.

## References

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interviewee Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the name of the innovation? Can you describe its function?
  
2. Can you describe the setting in which the innovation took place?
  
3. Other than yourself, were there other key players involved in initiating the diffusion? If so, who were they?
  
4. Why did you and/or other key players involved in the diffusion decide to introduce the innovation?
  
5. How long did it take for the innovation to be adopted or rejected?
  
6. What are the characteristics of the adopters of the innovation?
  
7. What are the characteristics of those who rejected the innovation? Why do you think they rejected it?
  
8. What are your personal thoughts about the innovation? What about the diffusion process? Is there anything you could have done to make the spread of the diffusion easier and/or faster?

## Appendix B

## Interview Data

Interviewee Title: **Principal K-5** Date: **10/6/15**

1. What is the name of the innovation? Can you describe its function?

- The technology we implemented is called Newsela.
- It is an online website that allows teachers to search for articles in all subject areas. Teachers can search for resources for grades 2-12. They can find things articles by typing key words. The articles come in different Lexile levels so teachers can meet the needs of all students. The teacher can assign articles and quizzes for the students to take. Unfortunately, our school only has the free version of the program so some of the features are not available.

2. Can you describe the setting in which the innovation took place?

- We are a kindergarten to fifth grade elementary school. We have 28 classroom teachers. The majority of our population is Hispanic and African American. We have about 750 students that come here. We have an RSP teacher, a speech pathologist, an intervention teacher, a counselor, and a language arts and math coach. We have about 15 students in the whole school with an IEP, an Individualized Education Plan. Most of our teachers are veteran teachers, although we have four who have been here for less than 3 years. More than 75% of students are on free or reduced lunch and we are a title 1 school.

3. Other than yourself, where there other key players involved in initiating the diffusion? If so, who were they?

- There were only two of us who introduced Newsela. I found it on the internet one day when I was looking for resources in reading comprehension. I talked to the intervention teacher here at our school and she thought it was a good idea. The intervention teacher supports students who are struggling with academics. Teachers refer students to her and she gives diagnostic assessments and picks students that struggle the most. She sees students in grades 2-5 in small groups for about 30 minutes. During this time she provides extra support for them in reading comprehension. I thought that Newsela would be a great tool to use with struggling students.



4. Why did you and/or other key players involved in the diffusion decide to introduce the innovation?

- I like the fact that Newsela has different Lexile levels. If you find an article, they give you the same information but using different levels of difficulty. Our school district promotes differentiated instruction and Newsela offers that. I also like that it is free. Our budget doesn't always allow for expensive apps or technology. It's also great practice for SBAC. Students are now required to read an article and answer questions on the computer. Newsela has a quiz of about 4 selected response questions and even a question that requires a written response. What I like the most is that the articles are non-fiction and relate to current events. Our current language arts textbook doesn't have a lot of quality non-fiction selections that prepares our students for the SBAC.

5. How long did it take for the innovation to be adopted or rejected?

- The intervention teacher introduced Newsela at a staff meeting. She had all the teachers in grades 2-5 bring their laptops to the meeting and create accounts. She went over the main features of the website as teachers followed along on their laptops or looking at her screen that was projected. Then teachers came up with ways they can use it in the classroom. The intervention teacher did presentation for about 45 minutes.
- I had grade level meetings and asked for progress of Newsela implementation about a month later. Some teachers had used it once or twice but most of them hadn't used it at all. Teachers planned 1 lesson using Newsela as a team and gave lesson within 2 weeks.
- The intervention teacher offered a voluntary tutorial of Newsela after school to give a more detailed explanation and use. Only 8 teachers attended.
- We introduced Newsela last school year in September 2014. Currently about half of the teachers use it regularly, the others don't really use it unless they plan a lesson as a grade level team.

6. What are the characteristics of the adopters of the innovation?

- The teachers who use it are the ones who are not afraid to try new things. They like to make learning fun and interesting for students. Most of them are also good with technology and use offer types of technology like Class Dojo for classroom management or Plickers for assessing. These teachers also tend to have high scores on student assessments.

7. What are the characteristics of those who rejected the innovation? Why do you think they rejected it?

- The teachers that don't use Newsela don't really like to use technology at all. Most of them are our veteran teachers. I believe they rejected it because they are overwhelmed with all the new things that Common Core standards have brought. They have voiced

their feelings of frustration with the SBAC and district assessments. They feel they don't have time to do anything other than what is required in the curriculum guides. They probably rejected it also because we don't have technology available for every student. We have 1 computer lab with 60 computers and 35 laptops teachers can check out. Teachers only have 2 desktop computers for student use in their classroom.

8. What are your personal thoughts about the innovation? What about the diffusion process? Is there anything you could have done to make the spread of the diffusion easier and/or faster?

- I really like Newsela. I think it is a great resource for teachers to help prepare students for the SBAC. I also think that it is great because teachers can use it in so many different ways. They can even print out copies of the articles if they prefer to use a paper and pencil copy instead of using a computer.
- We are still working on the diffusion process. Even after a year of implementation not all teachers are on board with using Newsela. My goal is for all teachers in grades 2-5 to use Newsela regularly.
- I think we can get more teachers to participate if we show them Newsela in action. I would like the intervention teacher to go into classrooms and model a lesson using Newsela so that the teacher can see how it is used and how effective it is. Another idea is for teachers to go observe another teacher that's using Newsela. Even providing actual lesson plans might have helped. I am going to try those things to see if I can still change the minds of the teachers that aren't using it yet.

Note: I typed responses as I conducted the face to face interview. I paraphrased and summarized responses as best I could since conversation was live and not recorded. I fixed grammar and conventions errors on document after interview was conducted.