Indistar: The Once and Future Innovation

An innovation doesn't stand still. As soon as it replaces whatever came before as a better way of doing something, it has become the standard practice. Ho hum. The former innovation is ready to be challenged by something new and better. But what if the innovation refuses to march in place and keeps generating improvements to itself—a pesky little innovation machine that will not be overtaken?

Redding, Twyman, and Murphy (2013) define innovation this way:

> Innovation is the application of an idea or invention, adapted or refined for specific uses or in its particular contexts (Gertner, 2012; Manzi, 2012). The implementation of an innovation proceeds over time, often with adjustments in course as the innovation is fitted to the context. An innovation replaces the standard product, program, practice, or process with something better, and as the majority adopts it, the innovation then becomes the new standard. (p. 8)

Indistar was born in 2008, in one state for a select group of persistently low-achieving schools, and has since been changing and adapting and fitting to the contexts of 25 states and thousands of schools across the performance spectrum. We believe it is now poised to up the ante, to raise the stakes, to take a leap forward as a pesky little innovation machine. The innovators in this brave new world will be the states, districts, and schools that have been fitting Indistar to their particular contexts.

The Academic Development Institute (ADI) and Center on Innovations in Learning (CIL) are pretty good at making lots of incremental improvements to the Indistar system and supporting states in their adaptations and applications of the system. In fact, CIL brings to Indistar a team of experts on learning and technology. Exciting. But the users must be the primary innovators, finding ways to optimize Indistar's capacities and suggesting new ways to do things better.

What was innovative about Indistar in the first place? The Internet was the tool, the vehicle, but not the innovation. Believing that the people closest to the students are best positioned to direct the improvement of their schools was not a new idea. Neither was collaborative planning by a Leadership Team. Nor a focus on professional practices as the chief drivers of improved learning. A continuous improvement process rather than a static annual plan made too much common sense to be truly innovative. Coaching the Leadership Team in the improvement process was, well, old hat. Convenient access to research and practice briefs and video demonstrations of effective practice are, by now, standard fare. What was innovative about Indistar was that it efficiently packaged all these good ideas into one system, and connected the state, district, and school for real-time interaction.

Inertia, entropy, and other words that describe a system's tendency toward stagnation, plague Indistar as much as any other system. Success with Indistar depends upon how it is used. If the principal is accustomed to "going it alone," he may skip the part about a collaborative Leadership Team and just enter stuff he thinks the state will like to see. If data-based decision making means looking at student outcomes a dozen more times without looking at the professional practices that produce the outcomes, then evidence of the full implementation of effective practices becomes an annoying distraction. If coaches rely on their personal charm and informal interactions with a few folks at the school, while avoiding focused attention to the Leadership Team's evolving and documented work, then so much for innovation in coaching. If the state accepts submission of a required report as "good enough," without feedback on the quality of the work, then "good enough" becomes the standard. If straight-forward, plain-language indicators of effective practice become overshadowed by jargon-riddled, compliance-ridden, bureaucratic checklists, then we have missed the point.

Get the picture? The initial innovation of Indistar was a packaging of several ingredients for district and school improvement. Like a gourmet recipe on the Food Channel, leave out an ingredient and the cake will flop.

Getting better at standard practice is incremental improvement. With Indistar, we all have plenty of room for incremental improvement with the basic ingredients of the package. Just the right amount of flour, and not too much sugar. That is not really innovation. But it is something we all must do; it is the code of the professional.

States may muse over the following questions:

1. Which indicators are most effective in advancing district and school improvements?
2. Which indicators can be culled from the system?
3. What new indicators might be added to the system?
4. What is the right core of "required" indicators, as determined by the state?
5. How can districts and schools be challenged to select additional indicators that fit their vision for where they want to go?
6. If a highly functioning Leadership Team is the *sine quo non* of success, how do we create them, support them, encourage them, build them?
7. How can we reduce compliance to (a) high-fidelity engagement with the process of continuous improvement and (b) the minimum necessary assurance of regulatory and financial accountability?

8. How do we enable states, districts, and schools to share their experiences, questions, and solutions with each other?

OK, that sounds like incremental improvement. Exactly. Let's do it because we are professionals.

Now for the great leap forward. Let's turn loose a network of innovators to bubble with ideas that may become innovations. What have states, districts, and schools learned that can be shared, amplified, taken to scale? The Indistar Summit and IndistarConnect are two vehicles for sharing; we need more. We need for the Indistar Network to come alive as a multi-state collaboration of innovators. Put on your thinking cap.

Reference

Redding, S., Twyman, J. S., & Murphy, M. (2013). What is an innovation in learning? In M. Murphy, S. Redding, & J. Twyman (Eds.), *Handbook on innovations in learning* (pp. 3–1▯). Philadelphia, PA: Center on Innovations in Learning, Temple University; Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. Retrieved from http://www.centeril.org/