

The Power of Context

By Anita McAnear



Educators at NECC 2004 in June had the opportunity to hear Malcolm Gladwell deliver the opening keynote. Gladwell, journalist and author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, became interested in how ideas, products, messages, and behaviors can spread just like viruses in an epidemic. According to Gladwell, epidemics have three characteristics—contagiousness, little causes with big effects, and dramatic rather than gradual change. The *tipping point* is the moment in an epidemic when everything changes all at once. Learn more at <http://www.gladwell.com/>.

Why would his ideas and analysis be of interest to educators? One reason was his point that all educators have social power. According to Gladwell, financial power and political power are well understood and respected, but we are often blind to the social dynamics that deeply affect the world.

Change is an interesting topic for education, as developing new knowledge, skills, and processes invariably

causes many changes for students, yet education itself is a very slow institution to change. Educators should be very interested in how to effect change. And Gladwell gives us much food for thought.

In many ways, technology is a catalyst for change, and we are all interested in effectively harnessing this capacity for positive changes in the learning environment that lead to improved student learning. Gladwell offers rules of the tipping point, one of which is particularly intriguing for education—the power of context. Educators can exercise control over the context for learning and cause change to happen.

Why isn't technology in education universally embraced, and why don't we have access on demand? In many ways, technology has spread like an epidemic through schools, but not often down to the student level. The context seems like a very important factor to think about, especially in terms of what changes we can make that will make a difference. According to Gladwell, people are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem.

The governor of Maine was looking for a change that would make a

difference in the economic outlook for his state. He knew technology had to be important, but his real “a-ha” was that the access had to be at the student level. Many schools have laptop initiatives, but Maine is the first statewide implementation, at least for Grades 7 and 8. Michael Muir, Gerald Knezek, and Rhonda Christensen describe the implementation and results so far (p. 6). Doris Ray looks at the staff development model that produces teacher leaders as well as staff development support for all teachers in Maine (p. 12). As we know with any technology implementation, the devil is in the details, so you can imagine how important the context is for success to happen.

It is interesting to look at successes, assess whether an epidemic occurred, and see how Gladwell's ideas might apply. If an epidemic hasn't occurred, is it possible to turn it into one? It is even more interesting, however, to read his ideas and then try to apply them to our own educational endeavors. I would encourage all of you to read *The Tipping Point* and think about your own social power!

Anita