

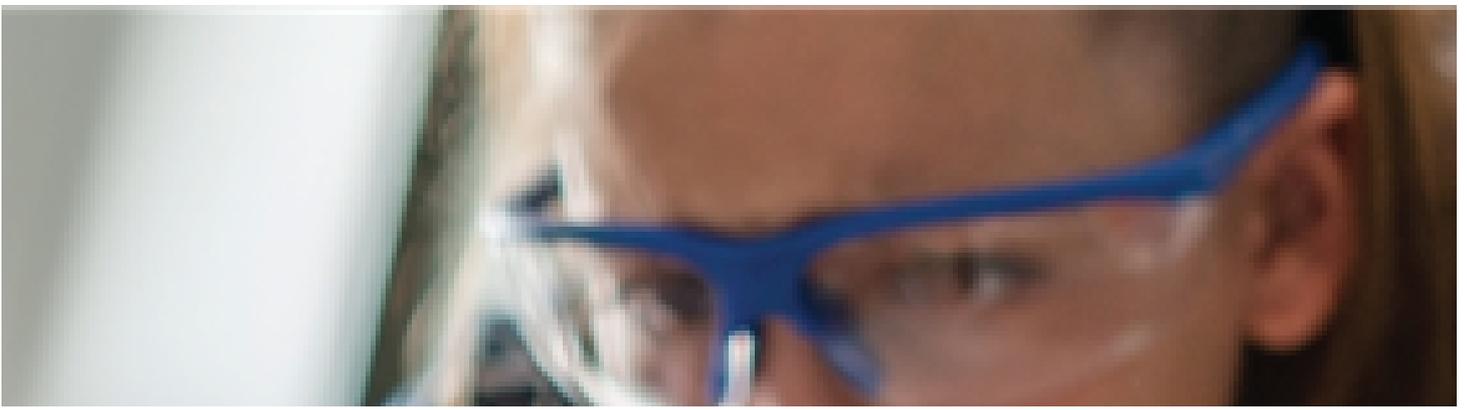


EMPOWERED LEARNER

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A delicate balance: Exploring the relationship between educators and edtech companies

By Jennifer Snelling
6/19/2018



The math students in Amy Tran's class at Quebec's Collège Beaubois have an unusual classmate. Eri is an artificial intelligence robot that communicates with them as they try to solve a problem. It understands which concepts they struggle with, and intelligently connects them with fellow students who assist. The students then work as a team to solve the problem. Not only do students get to practice working in teams, they're also learning about artificial intelligence (AI), a technology that will undoubtedly play a role in the future workforce.

Tran, a Collège Beaubois computer science and math teacher, is also an education evangelist with EruditeAI. She's working with the company and the school to pilot its AI-augmented peer-to-peer tutoring program by helping Eri absorb the enormous amount of data it will need to become "smart." Tran's students have participated in exchange meetings with EruditeAI's tech team where they provide direct feedback and share their learning needs and priorities, a research and development experience that few students get until they enter the workforce.

What did Tran, a 2017 ISTE Emerging Leader, do when she realized how working with EruditeAI could benefit her class? She did what every educator would do when they found something that would make a big difference for students. She turned to the modern-day equivalent of shouting it from the rooftop – she retweeted a quote from Harri Ketamo, a Finnish AI developer. "#Education is globally broken ... and it can't be fixed without #AI."

"The world changes very fast," says Tran. "Education is the only place that is adapting so slowly. Teachers should be at the forefront of preparing students for the challenges that are coming, but somehow, we're still trying to teach them facts from the 1950s. Working with tech companies creates a sense of urgency to update and gives kids the power to take the initiative."

ISTE members are well-versed in the ways that technology can enhance teaching and learning, and the mutually beneficial relationship between educators and tech companies has quickly become integrated into the average school day. When educators find something that works, they are eager to share what they've learned through social media, professional learning networks, at conferences and through face-to-face conversations with their colleagues.

A matter of intent

A recent series of *New York Times* articles called into question the relationship between educators and tech companies. Sometimes those relationships, the articles pointed out, can raise ethical concerns if teachers receive gifts in exchange for the promotion of products.

Educators must approach these relationships with clear-eyed intent and full knowledge about ethical standards that guide such interactions. Yet, in a world where education funding is so limited that teachers often buy school supplies out of their own paychecks, it's easy for educators to cross a line by accepting gifts they know could improve learning and teaching.

"We've been trained as educators to have critical thinking, and we have to exercise it," says Tran. "Do you work for the company first? No. You always have to think about the pedagogical intent."

Know the rules

Google has taught thousands of students how to use email, share documents, make presentations and store files on one simple operating system. Access to classrooms doesn't just allow vendors to sell thousands of products in bulk, it's a way to introduce your product to a generation of young people.

To get a foot in the classroom, tech companies often make those products available for free on a trial basis. "Sometimes it's free, but it's free like a puppy," says Adam Phyll, director of technology and media services in Georgia's Newton County School System. "You're still going to be paying for it in one shape or another."

While access to products is an obvious benefit for schools that struggle with tight budgets, that access means educators are left with the responsibility of knowing and following outdated and not always well-advertised federal, state and district guidelines.

For instance, is it OK if a company offers teachers a free product in exchange for feedback on the product or an agreement to write a testimonial?

On the one hand, both teachers and companies benefit if users provide feedback that can then be used to improve the product, as in the case with Tran and EruditeAI. On the other, if a teacher is being asked to promote the product, when does it cross a line and become pay for play? What if a teacher does so without being asked and clearly identifies herself as an employee of the company?

Phyll says the best policy is to check with your district's technology officer if a situation is murky or confusing. A review of your district's ethics policies is also a good idea. A T-shirt or an iPad cover? Probably no big deal. Covering the costs of a conference trip in exchange for staffing the company's booth or posting a review on social media? Possibly a problem. If a company asks for any paperwork or a contact, the district should definitely take a look.

Diana McGhee, chief information officer for Fort Thomas Independent Schools and the leader of ISTE's Technology Coordinators Network, says that, like most districts, hers has a board policy that says no employee shall accept gifts for *personal use* from vendors. "Do our teachers know that? We don't preach that to them every year," she admits. "Our policies are so numerous, you can't go into depth every year."

Of course, most of these guidelines haven't been updated to reflect the current situation where companies have direct access to teachers, and teachers have direct access to social media that can be used to promote products.

Another thorny issue arises if companies ask teachers to upload student information to use the system. Like the pay-for-play rules, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) requires schools to protect the privacy of student education records, but the law hasn't been updated since the days when everything was stored in a locked filing cabinet.

The core tenet of the law – keep student information private – applies. But there are exceptions that allow online education services to use FERPA-protected information, as spelled out by the U.S. Department of Education's Privacy Technical Assistance Center in a best practices report.

One example: "A district may decide to use an online system to allow students (and their parents) to log in and access class materials. In order to create student accounts, the district or school will likely need to give the provider the students' names and contact information from the students' education records, which are protected by FERPA.

"Conversely, other types of online educational services may not implicate FERPA-protected information. For example, a teacher may have students watch video tutorials or complete interactive exercises offered by a provider that does not require individual students to log in. In these cases, no personally identifiable information from the students' education records would be disclosed to (or maintained by) the provider."

Georgia districts can provide parents with student information that is saved electronically, but it becomes difficult to track information once it has been shared, says Phyll. He says the state is developing a common language about student information sharing and asking vendors to guarantee they follow the rules.

Likewise in Kentucky, says McGhee. The Kentucky Department of Education has passed House Bills 5 and 232, both of which target the idea of student data privacy and safety. Further, her district asks teachers to check the Student Privacy Pledge website (studentprivacypledge.org) that identifies vendors that have pledged to keep student data safe before uploading student data into any app.

Additional privacy resources are available through the U.S. Department of Education at tech.ed.gov/privacy.

Let teachers lead

As long as everything is aboveboard, working with vendors is a win-win for most educators. Schools and districts get to test drive technology and even make recommendations to companies and vendors get valuable intel, says Phil Hintz, director of technology at Illinois' Gurnee School District.

"We get the product fine-tuned to what we need. The vendor then has a product that is more compatible for more customers down the road," Hintz said. "We look to partner and sometimes that includes getting access to a beta version of an app or hardware so they can run clinical tests. We get to try it out and see the pros and cons of the product."

Gurnee School District has been 1:1 iPad district for six years. All the schools in the district are Apple Distinguished Schools and the district was an ISTE Distinguished District last year. Hintz says the district has also developed a close working relationship with NWEA, a nonprofit that provides assessment and mapping software. Gurnee has been a map test customer for 15 years.

"We give them feedback and they improve the product based on our feedback," he says. "Because of our relationship, we have the opportunity to get their ear and dive deeper into their tech support than the 1-800 number people typically get."

Andrew Smith, chief strategy officer for Rowen-Salisbury School System in Salisbury, North Carolina, relays a similar experience working with Tiggly, an iPad manipulative kit.

His district has an Educators' Playground, where teachers can try out the latest technology before they buy it. Located in the district's central office, the playground offers a creative space that encourages teachers to explore new tools that have been vetted and approved by the district's tech department.

At the playground, teachers provided feedback on Tiggly, including one suggestion to move the button down an inch to greatly improve functionality. "When that happens," he says. "There's some real power in that."

This type of thought partnership is what DreamBox Learning is built upon, says CEO Jessie Woolley-Wilson.

One teacher working with DreamBox, an online adaptive math learning program, could tell that the software understood what students knew and what they needed to learn next, but she wanted to know why the program couldn't share that information with her, the teacher. DreamBox adapted it to give teachers more control and assigning capabilities.

"We didn't get everything right out of the gate, but our best product innovations were birthed through discussions with teachers," says Woolley-Wilson. "Our inspiration for the technology was to mimic the best teachers with the best resources and an adequate amount of time."

Like many companies, DreamBox has its own forum, called DreamBox Nation, for educators who are happy to share best practices, frustrations and professional development around the product. Woolley-Wilson says

these evangelists for DreamBox are the very reason it is a for-profit company.

"It's really hard on learning communities when they train all their teachers and the company is gone two years later," she says. "Being for-profit, I'm able to attract the best minds and the best hearts. The best thing I can do to shape the future of learning is make sure DreamBox is a sustainable company year after year."

Procure with a purpose

Keeping up with the onslaught of email solicitations from various tech companies, new and established, is something every educator is familiar with. Many of these inquiries may lead to benefits in the classroom, but how to thoughtfully research and test each one?

It's common for edtech leaders to attend conferences, look at all the shiny new technology presented by the vendors, who are often excellent resources but even better salespeople, and decide that their district needs that product – only to find that it doesn't exactly fit the bill. Like Amy Tran, Rowan-Salisbury's Smith says it has to start with pedagogical intent.

"We're not good stewards of our taxpayers dollars when we let tools gather dust in a closet," he says. That's why Smith advocates starting with a needs assessment.

Rowan-Salisbury conducted a needs assessment and determined that the district should focus on ways to improve literacy. Smith and his team of educators developed a rubric around literacy and sent 250 teachers on buses to the ISTE Conference and Expo. Each teacher was asked to talk to 20 vendors and rank them according to the rubric.

"We bombarded them," says Smith. "But we brought back a rich set of data from a diverse set of educators. We used that rubric to identify the top two or three companies we would partner with."

Districts can't always afford to send staff to edtech conferences, but still they must sift through reviews and information to find the tools that are the best fit for the district. A new ISTE product, Edtech Advisor, helps ISTE members find and share which education tools, technology and apps to purchase or implement to meet learning objectives. Product ratings and reviews are crowdsourced from ISTE members so that other members can learn from their experiences at no charge.

In similar vein, Rowan-Salisbury vets edtech companies who want to attend the district's annual edtech camps. The district asks vendors to complete a comprehensive application to ensure that their products align with the district's strategic plan and integrates with the existing technology.

The database helps Smith's team narrow down the sheer volume of requests they get from vendors. Those who make the cut are invited to an edcamp where teachers use a rubric based on the district's needs assessment and/or strategic plan to identify products that are a good match for specific classroom needs.

Even with a rubric, it can be difficult to ensure a product will fit the bill without trying it out first. That's why Rowan-Salisbury created the Educator's Playground, where teachers can play with virtual reality tools, 3D printers, all sorts of coding tools. The technology is set up around the room like an exhibit. There's an explanation for what the tool does and the teacher's job is to figure out if the tool offers instructional value for his or her classroom.

"A 3D printer may seem like the best thing ever, but until you put the product in the same room with your instructional needs, you won't know that," he says. "Play before you pay."

Tool-specific trainings can help, but these trainings don't always keep the focus on the pedagogy.

"A certification plus ineffective teaching equals ineffective teaching," says Eric Patnoudes, director of strategic initiatives at Otus and a Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert. "Vendors are getting better, but

usually the certifications are based on your competency with their products. They rarely provide teachers with opportunities to improve their instructional strategies alone. At the end of the day, if we don't change the way we teach, all the certifications and technology in the world will not have a positive impact on teaching and learning."

A new competency-based, vendor-agnostic certification based on the ISTE Standards is designed to solve this problem. ISTE Certification trains and recognizes educators who understand how to use technology for learning in meaningful and transformative ways, regardless of the tool.

Dell is one company that advocates keeping the big picture in mind with a strategic technology plan based on pedagogy and desired outcomes. Dell's Education Academy was designed to guide districts through the development and assessment of that plan, before procurement. Of course, the hope is that districts will eventually become Dell customers, but the team doesn't show up with a Dell catalogue.

"It's important to understand the way students learn today and the role technology plays in that process," says Adam Garry, a former elementary school teacher and Dell's director of global education strategy. "It doesn't matter if it's HP or Apple. If kids aren't learning, it looks bad for the whole industry."

Jennifer Snelling is a freelancer who writes for a variety of publications and institutions, including the University of Oregon. As a mother to elementary and middle school-aged children, she's a frequent classroom volunteer and is active in Oregon schools.

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