

# Tech Monster in a Box

Craig Ullman

Innumerable technologies have been introduced into the schools, but few of them actually get used. Typically, the lack of use has been blamed on the technology itself (“It doesn’t work when I do X”) and sometimes that’s true. The lack of use is often blamed on insufficient teacher training on the new technology or simple lack of teacher time, and sometimes that’s true, too. But I think there’s a larger reason involved: the perception that every new technology is actually an unspoken critique of the teacher’s performance.



**Craig Ullman**, Partner, Networked Politics, 49 West 27th St., Suite 901, New York, NY 12401. Telephone: (646) 435-0697. E-mail: [cullman@networkedpolitics.com](mailto:cullman@networkedpolitics.com)

New technologies are often introduced into the classroom to make up for perceived inadequacies in instruction: “Can’t teach your students math? Just sit them down in front of a computer and watch the magic happen.” How can teachers not feel that their abilities are being questioned? Of course, if the technology actually is very effective, that only makes it worse.

Even beyond this, many technologies, either explicitly or implicitly, are based on a different pedagogy than the teacher has been trained in, or his or her teaching has devolved to. In fact, many technologies use this as a selling point, and many administrators buy technology in a not-so-subtle attempt to force teachers to change their pedagogy.

I’m not suggesting teachers will actively oppose new technology they believe is effective; they often won’t use it long enough for that to be demonstrated. I’m not even suggesting teacher opposition to new technology is always conscious; I’m sure many times it’s not. It’s always easy to convince yourself of all the reasons why not to do something.

Ultimately, it’s all about power.

Think of classroom practice being the product of a three-way tug-of-war among teachers, students, and administrators. Any

increase in leverage on one side is at the expense of one of the others. When the administration tries to change your behavior, exert some control over your classroom by introducing a new technology, the first thing you do—just like in a tug-of-war—is to dig in your heels. Inevitably, this kind of power struggle results in stasis, or someone winding up face down in the mud.

How do we get new technology to be seen as an ally of teachers and not as an enemy? The technology can be primed up to appear teacher-friendly, but that rarely convinces anybody. Rather, the decision to acquire the technology, and how to use it, has to come from the teachers themselves. If the teachers view the new technology as empowering rather than as a subtle rebuke, and if they are innovators, they’re vastly more likely to actually use it.

However, giving teachers authority over new classroom technologies creates a different problem; the administrators will have to give up some leverage in their tug-of-war. But when you’re playing a game, it’s very hard not to get caught up in it; nor do you forget the fear that by giving an inch your opponent might take a mile.

But sometimes you have to give in order to get—or you’ll end up face down in the mud, anyway.