The Need for Tech Integration Over Innovation in Education
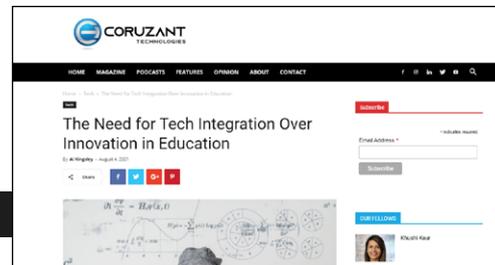
It's common to describe the impact of technology with fast, sweeping terms such as "revolution." And while that may be accurate in some circumstances, in some applications, it's not a good description for what's happening with technology in education – in edtech.

There, the pace of technological change has been both considerably slower and less directional. Finding the right word to describe the pace of technology-driven change in some schools is tricky, but it's probably something you'd usually find near the words "tectonic plates" or "glacial."

Public sector

There are many reasons for this. They significantly include that most schools are public institutions spending public funds, and public funds come with long, time-consuming regulations and procedures. For that reason and others, schools and school leaders tend to be risk averse – not eager to try new technologies and engage iteration.

That's not a criticism. Or in any way to imply that technology change in schools and classrooms and homes has been absent. To the contrary, if you could explore how a typical developed world classroom functioned 20 years ago, versus that same classroom today, the technology footprint would be obvious.

Today, many – maybe even most – teachers deliver at least part of their lessons and learning materials digitally. Using laptops or tablets in classrooms

is common for students. At higher levels especially, most assignments are submitted through digital learning management systems. Most grades are tracked, and delivered, electronically. We're probably still a long way off from Mrs. Brainmocker, the robot teacher of The Jetsons, but today's teaching and learning experience is, in most places, technology enabled.

Bring ideas to the classroom

Even so, there are many more entrepreneurs and innovators designing and investing in edtech products and tools than there are places to try them, teachers to learn how to use them, schools to buy them. That's not a bad thing either. We all need the pipeline of education ideas to keep flowing.

But the over-supply of product has indirectly and unintentionally also slowed the pace of technology change in education. For educators and school leaders, who for the most part are not technology experts, having a menu of 40 different solutions for a single, mid-level pain point, all with competing claims and requirements, is not something to celebrate.

And when technology products are selected for schools, they usually require significant and continuing user training, which can be difficult. When professional development does not happen, or does not happen well, and then the technology does not live up to its promise, hesitation to purchase future solutions grows. And rightly so.

In education, these factors – public funding, necessary training, risk avoidance and others – come together to complicate the pace of change.

Predictably, this confluence has accelerated the need and opportunity for technology solutions that are narrower in scope, those that are easy to understand, easy for educators to use and most importantly, work easily with other technologies already in place. In other words, in education right now the need is integration over innovation (and a plan for how to get there).

The influence of technology

Technology is changing education. Probably in more ways, more consequential ways than many people realize. It's just different. The needs are different, the timelines unique. The users are unique too.

For example, the frontline users of most education technologies are teachers, yet teachers aren't the "customers" of education. It's like designing technology for a restaurant knowing that the people you need to focus on aren't the patrons or the managers but the culinary artists in the kitchen, those who prepare the meals. It's not counterintuitive, it's just different.

In education, technology isn't described with words such as "revolution." Instead, it's being built more slowly around words like "solution." Edtech has an ongoing, generally healthy, solution evolution. Slower, less dramatic, but no less important.