Final Report and Best Practice Recommendations for Using Social Media for Information Dissemination at Advanced Technology Education Centers

Background:
The purpose of “Consuming Research: A Case Study on Research Dissemination Innovations and Best Practices” commissioned by the Information and Communication Technology Center was to understand the potential for Advanced Education Technology (ATE) Centers to harness social media platforms and technologies to communicate and engage with key audiences with regard to research and information dissemination.

Research methods:
Project Manager John Garvey, Research Manager Dave Sweeney and Research Assistant Gregg Tobin comprised the ICT Case Study Team. Their research methods included:

- **Attendance at the Synergy Conference in June, 2010**, to conduct informal interviews and begin assessing the information dissemination practices of the ATE Centers.
- **Attendance at the Hi-Tech Conference in July, 2010**, to:
  - Gather data using the Hi-Tech Survey to study the material dissemination practices and social media uses of several ATE Centers and Projects throughout the United States.
  - Videotape informal interviews with attendees discussing the use of social media for information dissemination.
- **A review of all ATE Center Websites and their use of new media platforms.** The ICT Case Study Team used unobtrusive data gathering to evaluate how all 37 ATE Centers are using their websites and social media platforms to disseminate information. The research also assessed observable levels of audience engagement, the variety of platforms used and disseminated content posted to those platforms.

  - **The identification of five ATE Centers for participation in the ICT Case Study Core Study Group.** The ICT Case Study Team conducted in-depth interview sessions with The Core Study Group, as well as conducted a review and evaluation of the Core Study Group’s current uses of new media tools, including the types of content, frequency of updates and levels of engagement.

The criteria for participating in the Core Study Group included:
• A desire to participate. Centers were given an opportunity to opt-in to the CSG.
• Currently using new media platforms.
• Diversity according to geographical region and sector.

The centers that met the criteria and participated in the CSG were:

• Convergence Technology Center (CTC)
• Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Center
• Florida Advanced Technology Education Center (FLATE)
• Mid-Pacific Information and Communications Technologies Center (MPICT)
• Maricopa Advanced Technology Education Center (MATEC)

As the ICT Case Study Team gathered and processed the data, they utilized social media tools to disseminate the information. The tools they used included a blog, Facebook Fanpage, Twitter and YouTube.

Benchmark organizations:
As part of the research and best practice recommendation process, the ICT Case Study Team identified national organizations against which to benchmark current ATE Center information dissemination practices. The organizations chosen for benchmarking were:

• The Pew Internet & American Life Project. The team chose the Pew Internet & American Life Project because it is “one of seven projects that make up the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonprofit "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. The Project produces reports exploring the impact of the internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care, and civic and political life.”

The Pew Internet & American Life Project regularly conducts research regarding Internet activity and usage and uses social media tools to disseminate the research findings.

• National Public Radio. National Public Radio has a significant national presence and has adopted multiple new media tools for information dissemination. They
also have established a strategy for effective information dissemination that includes the integration and cross-population of social media platforms.

**Best Practice Recommendations:**
As part of the ICT Case Study best practice recommendations, the ICT Case Study incorporated these recommendations as part of the dissemination of the case study’s findings, thereby modeling the behaviors while conducting the study.

The ICT Study team recommends and utilized a three tiered approach to information dissemination.

1) Primary (Blog or similarly organized content on an organizational website)
2) Secondary (Platforms such as YouTube, Flickr that can deliver supportive content to the primary platform via hyperlink)
3) Broadcast (Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter which can aggregate audiences and are engagement friendly)

**The Blog as Primary Information Dissemination Platform**
After studying the benchmark organizations, reviewing the data from the ICT Case Study surveys and research, as well as studying industry research, the ICT Case Study team recommends the best practice of maintaining a blog as the primary source for information dissemination. While the blog can be located at an independent URL, for Search Engine Optimization reasons (SEO), blogs that are imbedded in the organizational website are recommended as a best practice.

Using a blog as the primary source for information dissemination is based upon these considerations:

- **Blogs are a widely recognized and used communication platform.** As of 11/22/10 there are 151,004,657 blogs online (BlogPulse). According to the Forrester Research 2007 Technographics survey, 1 in 4 adults who are online regularly read a blog. Familiarity with the blog format and its prevalence online make blogs a widely understood and accessible platform for information dissemination.

Some ATE Centers currently maintain a blog for information dissemination. MATEC has maintained its Techspectives blog since 2007. CTC has enlisted a
technology student to maintain a blog to which CTC links. The ICT Center has established its blog as an industry leader due to its subject matter expertise. They also help others create and maintain their own blogs.

- **Integration.** Blogs allow for the integration of multiple media types, including still images, video and audio, just to name a few. Research from the ATE Center Websites and the Core Study Group revealed that most ATE Centers are using a significant amount of multiple media types as part of their information dissemination activities. The hosting of these media types on other platforms such as YouTube and Flickr is addressed in the section on Secondary platforms.

Integration also can mean the elimination of additional workflows. While most ATE Centers have a monthly or quarterly newsletter, FLATE uses its blog as its monthly newsletter, thereby integrating the blog into its regular communication strategy without having to create an additional communication vehicle.

Most of the ATE Centers who are on social media networks also integrate links to the platforms into their regular communications, including electronic newsletters and on the ATE Center Websites.

- **Search engine optimization.** Blogs can play an important role in search engine optimization for ATE Centers. By regularly updating their blogs with keyword-rich titles and postings, ATE Centers are creating searchable content that impact search engine rankings. The ICT Case Study team recently addressed this topic on the ICT Case Study blog. As previously mentioned, co-locating the blog with the organization’s website provides desirable SEO attributes.

- **Blog platform recommendations.** There are several platforms from which to choose to create and maintain a blog. Several of the ATE Centers, including MPICT, CTC, FLATE and the ICT Center are using Blogger, Google’s free blogging platform. MATEC is using WordPress, another platform that has a free, basic platform.

The ICT Case Study team started with Google’s Blogger but early in the study changed to WordPress. The team made the switch due to Blogger’s lack of functionality and the ability to do more with WordPress. The WordPress functionality included the ability to post summary sentences of blog postings and
the ability to embed user engagement elements like polls, ratings, etc. In general, there is a large user community regularly creating new design templates, plug-ins and widgets for WordPress that do not exist for Blogger.

For more advanced users of WordPress, it also has the ability to be embedded into an existing ATE Center Website, making for a seamless user experience. From an ATE Center perspective, this integration is useful because it eliminates the need to maintain two separate sites. In addition, the WordPress content management system is intuitive and user-friendly, making updates easy and not time consuming.

**The Secondary Platforms: YouTube, Flickr**

Secondary platforms are defined as platforms that serve the blog (primary platform) with unique, often platform specific content. As suggested in this report, generally speaking, blogs can accommodate a variety of content types. Storing content on a secondary platform and serving it to the blog by hyperlink provides desirable audience consumption and SEO opportunities. Examples of these platforms are YouTube and Flickr.

Looking at our benchmark organizations, it became clear that there is a strategy and method behind how they use multiple social media platforms for information dissemination. The strategy includes the establishment of a primary platform that is supported by secondary and tertiary new media platforms. The strategy for secondary platforms recommended by the ICT Case Study is as follows:

- **Secondary platforms support the primary platform.** As outlined above, the ICT Case Study team recommends a blog as the primary platform for ATE Centers. Secondary platforms, such as a YouTube channel should support the primary platform. An example of utilizing a secondary platform is the video interview with ICT Case Study team about new media platforms currently used by ATE Centers.

  1. The video is hosted on the ICT Case Study YouTube channel.
  2. The first line of the video description is a link back to the ICT Case Study blog.
  3. A posting on the ICT Case Study blog includes a description of the interview. The video follows and is embedded in the blog posting.
4. Information posted on the ICT Case Study Facebook page and ICT Case Study Twitter account links users to the blog posting, not the YouTube channel.

The same holds true for any postings on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. All communications point back to the content on the ICT Case Study blog. In addition, all postings consistently use blog titles and links in order to maximize search engine optimization opportunities.

- **Saving time and other benefits of using secondary platforms to support the primary platform.** Establishing that all secondary content supports the primary content platform eliminates the posting of non-strategic and irrelevant information. It also reduces the time required for managing multiple distribution platforms, which was a significant concern voiced by ATE Center leadership throughout the case study.

This approach also makes for a more streamlined and strategic approach to using these platforms for information dissemination.

**Broadcast platforms: Facebook and Twitter**

Broadcast platforms include Facebook and Twitter and should be used mainly to broadcast information that has been made available on the primary platform, and perhaps, the secondary platforms. The key for successfully using these distribution platforms is ensuring that posted content is purposeful and relevant. As part of establishing this strategy for distribution platforms, the ICT Case Study team did an evaluation of its own use of Facebook and Twitter and eliminated content that did not support the strategy.

**Information dissemination goals and objectives**

The Hi-Tech survey showed that most ATE Centers desire greater engagement with their audiences. However, as the results from the Hi-Tech survey also indicate, most ATE Centers are not leveraging the social media platforms that allow for the best opportunities for engagement. From static electronic newsletters to a lack of regular communication, engagement becomes difficult. Social media platforms call for regular, sustained communications and conversations between the ATE Centers and their audiences. Blogs allow for that engagement by allowing readers to comment on postings, share links and/or rate postings. Some blogs allow for other interaction functionality like including a poll in a posting. On Facebook and Twitter engagement, in the form of “like,” comment,
and retweet, is much more the norm than perhaps on blogs. Generally speaking therefore, ATE centers can expect higher levels of engagement on those platforms event though they are considered distribution platforms for the purposes of this study.

Understanding engagement, however, means understanding the behaviors of Internet users. According to the Forrester Research *North American Technographics Empowerment Survey, Q4 2009*, 37% of online consumers are considered “critics” – people who will post ratings or reviews, comment on blogs, contribute to forums and/or contribute to wikis. However, 70% of online consumers are considered “spectators” – people who read blogs, listen to podcasts, watch video, read forums, read user-generated reviews and/or read Tweets.

Consequently, the ICT Case Study team recommends that the ATE Centers clearly define their expectations with regard to engagement when creating their information dissemination strategies. One recommendation would be to consider consumption (reading/viewing a post, video, tagged image, etc.) as a basic form of engagement when creating the strategy to account for the activity of their audience.

**Conclusion:**
Given the explosion of new media platforms and social media networks during the past few years, there is significant justification for ATE Centers to continue to adopt strategies to leverage these platforms more effectively. The research indicates many ATE Centers currently are using or experimenting with multiple platforms – from blogs to Facebook to YouTube to Wikis - but in many cases without clearly articulated outcomes, expectations, and strategies. The ICT Case Study recommends that ATE Centers start developing written strategies leveraging these platforms. The strategy should include a review a current information dissemination practices to determine how the use of social media platforms may streamline current communication practices in order to maximize the use of existing resources. The best practices from the ICT Case Study also should be a consideration as ATE Centers craft their strategies.

It is the position of the ICT Case Study team that the adoption of new media platforms does not have to be in addition to existing dissemination activities. The creation and adoption of a coherent strategy for leveraging social media may result in the elimination and/or shifting of some dissemination activities to the new platforms resulting in an even greater deployment of current resources.
With regard to increasing engagement with ATE Center audiences, the ICT Case Study team recommends the adoption of platforms that allow for real-time engagement, such as a blog, to allow for more regular communication between the ATE Centers and their audiences. For this to be effective, however, the ATE Centers will need to increase regular communications from monthly or quarterly to weekly, at a minimum. While this may seem daunting at first, a key to success is that more regular communication requires a smaller amount of content. For example, a monthly newsletter with multiple articles can be broken down into individual articles that are posted weekly, resulting in the same amount of content spread over a longer period of time. Similarly, a blog post supported by secondary content/platforms can be disseminated first (as a whole) with individual segments of secondary content being disseminated as a follow up.

For additional information from the ICT Case Study, including survey results and other data, please read the other postings on the ICT Case Study blog.