

Disrupting Class:

How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns

By: Clayton M. Christensen,
Michael B. Horn, & Curtis W. Johnson

Megan Mallon

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The words “disrupting class” bring to mind a picture of a noisy student yelling out or a morning filled with interruptions from announcements over the intercom. In these situations, the disruption is a nuisance. In his book, Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns, however, Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) proposed that disruption is just what the educational system needs to become successful. In a model that has proven successful with many businesses, disruptive innovation is a process of reform that changes the dynamics of schools so that every child is successful. The first step is to customize teaching so that each student is taught the way they learn. This is followed by the growth of computer-based learning and student-centric technology. It is also important to define the role of the teacher, and how they, as the educator, can make disruptive innovation truly work for the public school system.

Educators are familiar with the idea that accommodations are needed for any student on an individualized education program (IEP). What is important to realize, as Christensen et al. (2008) stated, is that “*all students* have special learning needs” (p. 35). Teachers should differentiate their instruction to fit the individualized needs of their students, much along the lines of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2008, p. 25). This is not a new idea. Educators use it on a daily basis. For example, customizing a language arts lessons to the learning needs of students rather than teaching one broad lesson to all the students at once. Differentiated instruction is a vital piece in giving every student the tools they need to be successful.

Christensen et al. (2008) explained computer-based learning as software with instructional methods that mirror the dominant type of learning style in each student and

which disrupt the monolithic style of teacher-led instruction (p. 91). Related to this idea is the notion of student-centric technology. In everyday terms, “student-centric technology” is similar to a personalized tutor for every student (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 92). Take, for example, the subject of electrical circuits, which is in the 3rd grade curriculum. The students come with a wide variety of prior knowledge on the subject. If a student was unfamiliar with the concept, they could work step by step through an explanatory program (similar to work they would do with a tutor). A student who already had an understanding of simple circuits could use an internet-based program that lets them build parallel and series circuits. By providing each student with these technological tools, a teacher is greatly enhancing the chances of success.

With all of these new ideas, one may wonder how the role of the teacher will change. The authors’ main point about disruptive innovation is causing educators to move away from monolithic teacher instruction (p. 10). They estimated that “at least 80 percent of the typical teacher’s time is now spent in monolithic activity, and less than 20 percent is available to help students individually” (Christensen et al., 2008, p.111). Although this is a discouraging statistic, it needs to be stated that with the strong emphasis on the results of state assessments, it can be difficult to completely do away with whole group instruction. There are many great benefits of students working on cooperative groups in a classroom. They learn from each other, especially when working with a partner who has different learning styles. As with any new concept or idea in education, balance is key.

Christensen et al. (2008) determined that “to succeed, disruptive technologies *must* be applied in applications where the alternative is nothing” (p. 74). By looking for

the roots of the problems that public schools are having, the authors (2008) have encouraged a common language that has resulted in a broader agreement about what change needs to happen (p. 193). This disruptive innovation can be especially successful for teachers when defining their role in this new system. By customizing education through computer-based learning and student-centric activity, each student truly can be successful in their education.

Reference:

Christensen, C. M., Horn, M.B., & Johnson, C.W. (2008). *Disrupting class: How disruptive innovation will change the way the world learns*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.