Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns

Michael Horn, Keynote Speaker

Michael Horn’s book, Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns, co-authored with Clayton Christensen, claims that the disruptive innovations that propelled successful companies to the top are the same kinds of innovations needed to transform education. The current educational system, “designed for standardization,” ignores the individual needs of each student. The answer to this problem, Horn and Christensen argue, is in meeting the demand for individual instruction through customizable online learning.

What is Disruptive Innovation?

Horn opened his presentation by outlining the difference between “disruptive” and “sustaining” innovation. The first Xerox copier, he said, was a “disruptive” innovation because it completely transformed the way copies were made, making the previous way of making copies nearly obsolete. The first color copier, however, was a “sustaining” innovation—it was a new product built on an existing model.

Disruption in business models has been the dominant historical mechanism for making things more affordable and accessible—in the past, department stores transformed the landscape. Today, Wal-Mart has transformed the department store. Tomorrow's Wal-Mart? Internet retail shopping.

Yet if it’s known that disruptive innovations frequently make companies successful, why don’t they happen more often? Horn claims that it’s because the organizational model locks people in. “Business units don’t evolve,” he said. “Corporations do.” He compared this to schools, saying that schools are essentially set up using the “business unit” model, or one that depends on standardization, and thus actually prevent themselves from innovating.

Online Learning

In 2009, 27% of high school students took a course online. By 2019, Horn predicts, 50% of high school courses will be delivered online. Horn shared that when he first published this projection, he was criticized for being “too wild.” Now, he says, “people are criticizing it for being too conservative.” Historically, he said, schools have treated online learning as a sustaining, rather than disruptive innovation—by doing things like adding computers to libraries. This preserves the existing business model, which is easier for schools, but keeps the innovation “in a box.”

The way many schools are incorporating online learning into the existing curriculum is by utilizing “blended learning.” Horn defined blended learning as “any time a student learns in part in a supervised brick-and-mortar place away from home” and “is educated at least in part through online
delivery, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace.” Using this definition of blended learning, which is defined from the perspective of the student, things that schools traditionally think of as blended learning are in fact not. For example, using Horn’s definition, a teacher using an electronic white board with an online curriculum to lecture in class is not blended learning. Neither is a student simply using an online textbook rather than a hardcopy one. Horn stressed that faulty thinking about what blended learning is will lead schools to misinterpret what innovation truly is, and thus misidentify the need for transforming the landscape of education.

The Options
While Horn is, in many ways, a “futurist,” he is also a realist. He recognizes that not all schools are going to be interested in scrapping their entire campus to embrace a Smartphone-only future, for example. Thus, he claims, there are two options.

1. **Frame online learning as a sustaining innovation and disrupt class.**

   If a school wants to use online learning in the “color copier” sense, it needs to then say, “What can we do uniquely as a school that can’t be done online?” He encouraged the business officers in the room to work with their heads, trustees, and senior staff to figure out the answer to this question, and then work to deliver the answer (and for the business officers to figure out how to finance the delivery). He suggested that one way online learning could be used by schools without completely disrupting the model would be to radicalize homework. He also stressed the adoption of new metrics—rather than work with “seat time” as a metric, schools should be using “mastery” as a metric (i.e., how can school leaders think from the perspective of improving performance first, and standardizing classrooms second?).

2. **Drive the disruptive innovation.**

   However, if a school wants to embrace the challenge posed by the radically changing world of technology, and be “Skype” rather than “AT&T,” it needs to develop an autonomous business model. Here, Horn said, he doesn’t have an answer, or a prescription, but rather, encouraged the business officers in the room to look at educational innovators like Apex Learning, Florida Virtual School, and K12. These organizations are using student-centric technologies to revolutionize the way students learn. He invited the audience to have a serious discussion about the way these new players have used disruptive innovation to re-invent what education is.

**Hiring A Milkshake**

Horn concluded his talk by recounting research that Christensen did to figure out how a fast-food company could increase its milkshake sales. Christensen’s researchers asked customers who bought milkshakes, “What job are you hiring this milkshake to do?” Contrary to what the fast-food company believed (that its customers were “hiring” the milkshake to be “dessert”), Christensen’s research proved that the majority of milkshake-buyers were “hiring” the milkshake to be “entertainment” that also filled them up: most milkshake-buyers bought their milkshakes at 7am, prior to a long commute,
because they wanted to drink something viscous that would last as long as possible and provide some fun distraction during their boring ride. A bagel, they said, didn’t do the “job” well—it was too messy. A banana? Coffee? These things disappeared too quickly. A milkshake, these customers said, “did the job perfectly.”

So what jobs are students trying to do? Horn says that there are two: “progressing with their minds/achieving success at their studies” and “having fun with friends.” Horn encouraged the audience to think about how the school facility actually supported these two endeavors, allowing students to succeed at their jobs. Tying his work into Daniel Pink’s, he asked business officers and other independent school leaders to think about what it takes to actually motivate students. Horn said that the key reason why students’ motivation is weak is that schools are improperly integrated: in other words, instruction is typically “uncoupled from activities in which students can feel success.”

He offered two tips for pursuing radical innovation: 1) be patient for growth but impatient for profit, and 2) to change a culture, test the proposed innovation as rapidly as possible with a small group. He concluded his talk by saying that schools need to innovate because “when education is not delivered in an intrinsically motivating way, prosperity is an enemy to education.”

**Takeaways:**

1. Understand the difference between disruptive and sustaining innovation.
2. Choose whether you are using online learning as a sustaining or disruptive innovation.
3. Change your metrics from ones of “standardization” to ones of “customization.”
4. Have a conversation with your senior leadership team about how your school’s architecture (in the largest sense) allows students to succeed at their “jobs.”
5. Look at examples of disruptive innovators like K12.
6. Test your chosen innovation as rapidly as possible with a small group.

**Taking Charge**

Using these takeaways as a starting point, schedule a time to have a conversation with a member of your senior leadership team about one or more of these important issues. Keep this report as a reminder that you have the power to be a transformational leader at your school.

*To download the complete PowerPoint presentations by Pink, Goldblatt, and Horn, visit the “Events Materials” page in the Members section at www.nboa.net.*