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Teaching for Tomorrow: Disrupting Class to Reinvent Education

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Michael B. Horn, Co-founder of Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation

Summary Paragraph/Key Points

Jack was about to enter a Grade Five classroom in California when Mr. Horn met him. Jack had just gone through a tough year in math in which he finished third from the bottom of the class. He felt he was on the verge of understanding concepts such as two-digit multiplication, but he always seemed to run out of time before the unit ended and the teacher moved on to another lesson.

“Schools were not built for learning,” Mr. Horn said. “They were modelled after factories. There is a batch or class, a date of manufacture, then they add value, that is instruction and ship them out or graduate them.”

The author of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World* admits that the traditional education system has had a good run. Its fixed time-variable learning approach churned out an impressive number of workers for the factory economy. That era is over, however, and the knowledge economy will require a different kind of worker. The gaps in students’ learning, like Jack’s problem with two-digit multiplication, will catch up to them. Since it is prohibitively expensive to tutor each child, a new type of education model is needed, one that is tailored to each individual student.

“We are living in a historic era to transform,” Mr. Horn said. “The most disruptive innovation since the printed book is online and mobile teaching because it allows for each student’s different needs at different times depending on the subject and time.”

Blended learning combines classroom or “offline” time with online. The online component allows the student some control over the time and pace of learning. What you learn in the classroom, must be connected in some way to the material studied online.





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“Blended learning flips the fixed time-variable learning model,” Mr. Horn said. “Now the learning is fixed but the time is variable. Educators still test and assess, but the students only move on once they have demonstrated mastery of a topic. It embeds rigor in systematic way.”

Blended learning is not inherently positive or negative, but if utilized correctly and if technology is leveraged to challenge students but also provide support, the technique should teach skills such as grit, perseverance and student agency that will be more important in the 21st century workplace. Teachers under blended learning will become more important than ever, but their role will shift from lecturing to mentoring and facilitating Socratic discussions and group projects, and counselling students on their emotional challenges.

Jack did not go to a traditional grade five classroom. He went to a blended learning academy that used the Khan Academy online teaching platform, which starts from the beginning of a topic and moves on when a student masters it. Jack started back in first, second, and third-grade math where he discovered holes in his learning; holes that might have lead to his difficulties with two-digit multiplication. Unlike grade four, he was given control over how much time he needed to spend on each unit; the teacher would not just move on if Jack didn’t grasp the subject. Jack ended going from third from the bottom to third from the top.

“Teachers armed with technology could meet Jack where he was and engage him,” Mr. Horn said. “This is a huge opportunity to design classrooms with completely different environments that inspire passion.”

