

Will Blended Learning Fulfill its Disruptive Potential?



By [Thomas Arnett](#) 12/12/2016

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As I



mentioned in [an earlier post](#), the history of education in the United States includes a long list of ambitious programs, initiatives, and reforms that have floundered in producing their promised improvements in student outcomes. Veteran teachers and school leaders have seen wave after wave of pedagogical, curricular, and policy fads wash over the education landscape with little lasting effect. Given this history, could blended learning be just the latest educational fad to follow this same pattern?

Hopefully not.

At the Christensen Institute, the central theme of our research is [disruptive innovation](#)—a powerful theory of change that can overcome the faddish cycles of never-ending education reform. During the last decade, we’ve [documented](#) how online learning—often in the form of [blended learning](#)—is an innovation with disruptive potential to transform our antiquated, seat-time-based education system. With the rise of blended learning, we foresee a future for education in which schools and teachers are empowered with tools and instructional models to better address students’ individual learning needs and ensure that all students can achieve at high levels.

Unlike other reform efforts, however, the disruptive potential of blended learning does not depend on advocates winning debates about its theoretical benefits. The process of disruptive innovation brings change not through deliberate reform, but through organic transformation. Disruptive innovations get their initial foothold by addressing unmet [jobs](#) with solutions that appear primitive and crummy but are far better than the alternative of nothing. They then gain mainstream adoption as they develop beyond their crummy origins and prove that they are better than the long-established mainstream alternatives. Adoption then happens naturally as the new innovations persuade people to leave behind the status quo for something better.

In education, early forms of blended learning got their start by offering new alternatives for students who needed advanced coursework, credit recovery, supplemental courses, or learning opportunities in extenuating circumstances. Now, as blended learning continues to improve, it makes an increasingly compelling case to parents, teachers, students, and school leaders that it is better than traditional instruction at addressing their day-to-day challenges. Thus mainstream adoption of blended learning will come not from policy reform, but from persuading the people who work at the ground level in education.

But as adoption of online learning grows, there is still a cautionary tale to be told. Just as a naive gardener can stunt or kill a sprouting seed by planting it in bad soil or poor sunlight, enthusiasts of blended learning can likewise stunt or kill the disruptive potential of blended learning and turn it into another failed education fad if they approach it in the wrong way.

Hiring blended learning for the wrong jobs

One of the core principles of disruptive innovation theory is that new technologies improve over time. But of all the potential ways in which a technology could improve, which types of improvements ultimately make the cut? In the organic process of disruptive innovation, customer demand determines the improvement trajectory.

This fact comes with a warning for educators: blended learning will evolve to address the problems they hire it to solve. If school leaders and teachers adopt blended learning as a strategy to personalize learning, increase students' academic mastery, and develop students' noncognitive skills, then the technology will improve along those dimensions. But if school leaders adopt blended learning merely to increase out-of-district enrollments, increase course offerings, boost [credit completion rates](#), lower staffing costs, or decrease the demands placed on teachers, then blended-learning technologies will become increasingly cheap, convenient, engaging, and easy to use without necessarily improving students' academic or life outcomes. In short, educators who adopt blended learning need to consider carefully what they are hiring it to do, because by and large, they will get what they ask for.

Mandating technology based on hype rather than demonstrated effectiveness

In most sectors, disruptive innovations do not gain mainstream adoption until independent consumers can prove that the new technologies help them make progress against their recurring challenges. This market-based adoption process ensures that new technologies only scale when they can deliver on their promises.

In education, however, the dynamics that guide technology adoption are not always driven by demand from end users, and this can be detrimental to both quality instruction and the progress of disruptive innovation. In many instances, the people who make technology adoption decisions are not the students, teachers and school leaders who ultimately use the technologies, but legislators, state officials, school boards, and district administrators who are often removed from the day-to-day work of educating students.

Problems arise when higher-level decision makers mandate blended learning or make large-scale technology purchases based on the overhyped claims of technology boosters or on their own political desire to make their schools look innovative. When this happens, students and teachers often find the new technologies and blended-learning programs to be more of a detriment than a benefit to education. As a result, technologies and models with disruptive potential sprout prematurely and then wither in the heat of the sun because they are adopted before they have a proven track record at outperforming traditional instruction in addressing students and teachers' needs.

To avoid this problem, higher-level decision makers need to take one of two approaches. They need to either give on-the-ground educators the authority and resources to make technology adoption and implementation decisions, or they need to work very closely with students, teachers, and school leaders to ensure that top-down efforts will effectively address educators' day-to-day challenges.

Adopting blended learning without a plan for continuous improvement

As mentioned earlier, disruptive innovations improve over time at addressing the challenges they are hired to solve. But one fact that complicates the disruptive growth of blended learning is that educators are both the customers and the innovators. Successful blended-learning models depend not just on purchasing the right technologies, but also on

how well schools and teachers integrate those technologies into an effective blended-learning model. School culture, professional development, classroom processes, and teacher expertise all play important roles that can make or break the success of a blended-learning program.

Because high-quality blended learning depends on both technology and implementation, educators need to see blended-learning programs not as one-and-done interventions, but as a quest for continuous improvement. That quest starts with defining the specific, measurable outcomes they want to achieve through blended learning. Educators then need to adopt processes—such as [discovery-driven innovation](#)—for testing, iterating, and refining their blended-learning models in low-cost, low-stakes ways before taking them to scale across a school or district.

One of the beauties of disruptive innovation is that it can transform a sector organically without the need for strong political advocacy or policy reform. But just as a good seed planted in bad growing conditions will fail to produce good fruit, disruptive innovations that scale under the wrong circumstances can fail to produce socially-beneficial outcomes. To ensure that blended learning fulfills its potential for improving education, education leaders need to consider carefully how they go about adopting and supporting blended-learning efforts. Otherwise, the forces of disruptive innovation that could transform education for the better may be stunted in their progress or may not lead to the outcomes we hope to see.

—Thomas Arnett

Thomas Arnett is a Research Fellow of Education at the Clayton Christensen Institute.

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Program on Education Policy and Governance

Harvard Kennedy School

79 JFK Street, Cambridge, MA 02138

Phone (617) 496-5488 Fax (617) 496-4428