

## Back in Conversation: New Beginnings on Class Disrupted

*Back for Season 5, Michael and Diane catch up on their summers and book reading, Diane's new entrepreneurial venture, PointB, the season ahead—and then offer some hot takes on the reading wars and Lucy Caulkins, four-year college-for-all, and education jargon.*

Diane Tavenner:

Hey, Michael.

**Michael Horn:**

**Hey, Diane. We are back. It's been a little while.**

Diane Tavenner:

It's been more than a minute, for sure. It is really good to be here with you and in a little bit of a new space and new time.

**Michael Horn:**

**Indeed, indeed. And we should say most people are accustomed, I think, at this point, to us starting at the beginning of the academic year, which traditionally, or not traditionally, unfortunately tends to happen end of August, early September. But, Diane, you have some big news, like, you're no longer on an academic calendar, so everyone knew you were stepping down from Summit after 20 years. Tell us what you're doing now as we enter this fifth season.**

Diane Tavenner:

Well, Michael, I'm so glad to be back in conversation. I have missed it a lot, the rhythm of it. And what you're pointing out is this idea that for the first time in my entire life, I did not have a back to school experience. And I'll be honest, that has been an anchor point for me for my whole life. That sort of sets the schedule for the fall. So here we are. It's a little bit later, but I'm learning to be fluid with that time because I am not in schools anymore. I have co founded a new company called Point of Beginning, and we are working on a product called Point B, and it's a technology product that is really focused on helping students and right now, high school students.

But I think eventually, potentially younger students figure out and this probably won't come as a shocker to a lot of people if you've been listening for a few years, figure out their purpose and

what a pathway towards fulfillment will be post-high school. And while that can certainly be inclusive of four year college, we want to really focus on and expand the other possible pathways that exist for people, to help them, discover them, explore them, create their own vision for what that will look like, figure out how to make good choices, and then enact those pathways. And so we're about three months in about a week away from the first version of the product being tested by real people and in a real startup.

**Michael Horn:**

**That's exciting, Diane. So I have a couple reflections, but before we have those, my Point B, like, how do people find it on the Web? Learn about what you're doing. I assume there's going to be some schools that are like, do we get to sign up so our students can use this?**

Diane Tavenner:

Well, it's super early, but you can always reach out to me. You can find us on the Web at [mypointb.org](http://mypointb.org), and you can start to check out what's happening there. Sign up for updates if you're interested, and, of course, reach out to me. We want to talk with, work with anyone and everyone. And so if this is an area of interest or passion, I hope you will reach out and I hope we're going to get a lot of opportunities to sort of touch on these subjects that are so fascinating over the course of this season. Michael, because I do think this season's a little bit different. I think we're going to do some throwbacks to Season 1, but also a little bit different. So do you want to just talk a little bit about what's happening? I will say off the top, one of the things that's different is we will have video this year. I missed that memo. So you can see I didn't really dress up for you today, but I'll try to look better going forward. But what else is different?

**Michael Horn:**

**Yeah, no, I'm glad you prompted us on that because folks who have been listening to this for now in our fifth season are going to say, gee, there's some differences that I noticed. One, we're on video, we're coming to you from the Future of Education channel. But all that means is that you can find us in more places. So it's still Class Disrupted, still Diane and Michael having conversations, although we're going to have a lot more guests helping us drive the conversations this particular year. We'll get more to that in a little bit. But the Future of Education, as you know, is this other conversations that I started a few years back and it's something that broadcasts on MarketScale, it broadcasts on YouTube, it broadcasts through my Substack newsletter. But if you've been listening to us through The74, if you've been listening to us through wherever you listen to podcasts, whether that's Apple, Google, whatever Spotify, I don't know where else people listen to podcasts, I am, but those are some of the big ones, right? You can still do that. You'll still find us at Class Disrupted.**

**Nothing has changed on that front. It's just a few other avenues for us to get to connect with listeners and hopefully get some feedback, get some conversation started because we are all about listening and trying to find different pathways through education. And what I love about what you're doing at PointB is to me it touches on what I think is increasingly**

people are recognizing as like one of the central issues of education, which is it's not just the academic knowledge and skills. Yes, those are important, but they need to be in fulfillment of something and we have left a generation of individuals at the moment without having a real sense of purpose. And I think it shows up in our mental health stats. I think it shows up in the challenges we have around post secondary completion. I think it shows up in the challenges we have for employers to find employees that are psyched to be there and ready to be productive and contribute. And I think it prevails throughout is just there's a lot of people adrift Diane, so I love that you're tackling this and that, as you said, we're going to get know, beat up different angles of what it means to chart that pathway and purpose over this season.

**Not as a shameless plug for my pointB, but really just to really get at this issue that I think is so undergirding so much of what we do. I think it's great that we're going to get to dig into this.**

Diane Tavenner:

Well, one of the gifts of this transition, Michael, has been the ability to just really go back and be a learner in so many different ways. And one of the things I've been eager to catch up with you about is what you've been reading this summer, because that's always a big part of our conversations. And I feel like, oh, my gosh, we'll go each week, we'll talk about what we're reading, but there's this whole backlog right now. And so I'm really curious what you've been reading, what you've been learning. As I know my list, which is quite long, was very related to the transition. And I went kind of deep in areas of personal health and transition health and things like that as I kind of reflect on 20 years and you don't always take care of yourself. And there's these moments of reflection of like, how can I kind of catch up on that? I also did some deep diving on organizations and businesses and how when you get to start fresh, what do I want to bring forward, what do I want to do differently? What's the modern stuff there? And so those are some fun books, like [Farther, Faster, and Far Less Drama](#), Janice and Jason Fraser and [10X Is Easier Than 2X](#), which is a term I'm kind of allergic to in Silicon Valley, but I actually read [the book] and got a lot of value from it. That's Dan Sullivan and Dr. Benjamin Hardy. I'm going to get that wrong. [Atomic Habits](#) by James Clear as I changed my entire life. How do I have the routines and the habits that are really supporting how I want to be living? And then some other I finally felt like in a place where I could kind of reflect on the pandemic. And so [Premonition](#) by Michael Lewis, which is a fast-paced and fascinating and a story I wish I had known all these seasons, quite frankly. So that was really interesting. And we continue to be in tough times. And so also digging into [How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them](#) by Barbara Walter.

**Michael Horn:**

**Wow.**

Diane Tavenner:

That's some of my list. How about you? What is on your list?

**Michael Horn:**

**You've, gosh, you've gotten to read some interesting books. Here are mine. I'll be curious what your take is. I'll try to spin an arc of it, but mine, as you know, I had finally started to get into Harry Potter with my kids. So we have now completed the full set of Harry Potter books. I have read every single one. Number four, and the last one are my favorite. I thought they were the best written of them all, so that was super fun.**

**I did have this moment of pang, Diane, because, as you know, my kids recently turned nine, and I had this moment when I finished the 7th Harry Potter book. I was like this, like 90% likelihood this may be the last book I read out loud with my kids, right? And to be fair, one of them had already opted out, like she had read them all without me and gotten ahead, and one of them was nice and held on for my sake at my slow pace. So we got through all those Harry Potter books, and then I personally, because they're nine, was going deep on what does it mean when they're teenagers? And so Lisa Damour has been in my ear constantly over the last few months with her collection of three books, which I highly recommend. The most recent one is about [\*The Emotional Lives of Teenagers\*](#) in general. The first two are about girls raising girls who are teenagers. So she's terrific. It's been really helpful. And it does strike me a lot of the parenting advice is all really the same at the end of the day, but it actually helps to hear it in different modalities and formats and hear it again every three months or so.**

**So that was great. And then, of course, I had my history kick still going in the background. So I finished just before we started recording this, actually, a couple of days ago, the Ron Chernow biography of Ulysses S. [\*Grant\*](#), which is a terrific book if you want to get angry about the South's actions during Reconstruction after the Civil War. I learned a ton from it. Just really interesting about the development of him also as a leader and sort of how his values came out over time and like a really reticent hated to speak, for example, even while he was president, but then he traveled around the world after he was president and became quite a public speaker. And so just development and learning, right, as themes throughout all this.**

Diane Tavenner:

Interesting.

**Michael Horn:**

**So it's fun, Diane.**

Diane Tavenner:

That is really fun. And I will just say that your girls are nine. My son is 21. For those who've been following our kids sort of growing up over these years. And I have sort of welcomed a second son to our family who's also in that age group, so hopefully we'll get a chance to talk about him. But Rhett, who I talk about here sometimes as something to potentially look forward

to, Michael, he is writing an alternative history novel, right? So it's really fun. And so I'm getting to read and talk with him and brainstorm with him about that, which is pretty awesome.

And it goes back to the founding of the US. And he's got some interesting alternative narratives there. So I'm like, back into kind of those founding family founder, founding Father stories.

**Michael Horn:**

**Families, yeah. Yeah. That's awesome.**

Diane Tavenner:

And families.

**Michael Horn:**

**Well, being in being in Lexington, Massachusetts, and having just taken my family to Williamsburg, Virginia, where as a kid, I went every single spring break. Diane but my kids had never been there. And so my brothers, my parents, they all descended on Williamsburg, and we had an old family reunion and lots of nostalgia. But I was really impressed with how the place has updated its language and the way it talks about a lot of people in a lot of different roles who now, to be fair, I think when I was a kid, my kids were far more interested in the restoration and talking to the characters than I remember ever being as a kid. I remember just being not that let's put it that way as a kid, but it was a heck of a lot of fun. So I'll be very curious to read.**

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, well, his angle is, what if we didn't just have Founding Fathers? What if there was actually a founding mother at the Constitutional Congress? What might be?

**Michael Horn:**

**Different question. It's a good question. So before we wrap up and before we preview what's going to be the next episode, let's do just a few hot takes, if you will, because I've been burning on a few issues, sort of gnawing at me, and, you know, I've been sending you texts like, can we please talk about so I want to do this now. And so I've got a couple for you. You probably have one or two for me.**

Diane Tavenner:

I do.

**Michael Horn:**

**Awesome. The one I want to go into is we've covered, obviously, the reading wars on this podcast and sort of the ignoring, I would say, of the evidence right. Of how certain people need phonics and phonemic awareness to learn how to read and to decode. Right. And sort of what that's done. And you've made the point like, this should not be a problem we have in our country. Everybody should be able to learn how to read at this point. So I was listening to the Daily, the New York Times podcast, their coverage of it, and Michael Barbaro, classmate of mine at Yale, he and I worked very closely on the newspaper together.**

**And so I was listening to his version of sort of about Lucy Caulkins and sort of the history behind that and things of that nature. And what occurred to me was she and Fountas and Pinnell and all those people, they really messed people up with the Three Cueing method and all these things that sort of gave short shrift to teaching people to really learn how to decode. But they also had some really good things in there. And I guess I just had this moment of know, we've talked about how we're not thrilled with banning curriculum and stuff like that. And I guess I had this pit in my stomach, Diane, where I was like, Writer's Workshop is something that's a staple of the Lucy Caulkins curriculum. Right. And I don't know. I'd love your take as an educator, because I'm not one.**

**I just learn a lot about this space. But my take is, if the child doesn't know their letters and can't do any sounding out Writers Workshop, you're layering something over a novice learner that probably doesn't make a heck of a lot of sense. But once you have any ability to decode and do these stuff, even if it's not spelled right, I think there's probably a lot of value in having Writers Workshop to be able to like the purpose of writing is right? And to be able to spin these stories or respond to prompts or react to things that you've read aloud in class or whatever else. And the discussion format of the Writers Workshop and the ability to edit your peers work and things of that nature. It strikes me, Diane, that that's something like, we really wouldn't want to throw out the baby with the bathwater there, but I'm just sort of curious. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe Writers Workshop is like, this terrible thing, and I'm just not understanding.**

Diane Tavenner:

No. I have gotten a lot of joy from the passion of your texts that have been coming through over the summer about this. So it's so fun to be back in conversation. Here's what I would say. And as a former English teacher, as, you know, generally higher level middle and high school, but I was a reading instructor, too, for preschool through adults for a period of time, and this is where nuance is so important. And when we get into these battles and these wars, we lose the nuance, and we do throw the baby out with the bathwater. As an English teacher, writers workshops are among one of the most powerful tools and activities you can use, I believe. And I think most great English teachers believe that, too, and use them incredibly well, even with younger children, as you're talking about.

And so what I hope does not happen is that people just hear anything that's been associated with these non-scientific methods and ban them, if you will. And I think this connects to another thing you've been talking about, which is, like, jargon in our work and how we use it. So you'll get to

that in a moment. But no. Writers Workshops enable the practice of an extraordinary suite of skills that are really important that even young kids can start to practice. And it's a tool that can be used all the way up I mean, it is all the way up into professional circles. And so we should most certainly hold on to writers workshops. We should know what we're doing.

We should be critical and disciplined and apply the science and all of those things, but they should not be banned, for sure.

**Michael Horn:**

**Okay. All right. Well, I feel a little bit better. You have a hot take first before I go on my second one.**

Diane Tavenner:

Jargon well, I mean, here's what the conversation that's happening everywhere I turn right now in my networks and communities. And that is that the data is going to come out. We're going to see yet another year of, I believe, decline in four year college enrollment. And so that's several years. And we're not seeing the bounce back that I think people thought would happen after. COVID there's a bigger trend that is at play here. And I think what I'm hearing is people who like me, who have spent the last 20 years really focused on four-year college for all kids. They know that this has to be questioned, that this is maybe not the strategy for everyone going forward.

We need to be thinking about different pathways. They know it's fraught. They don't even know how to talk to their communities about it. I keep hearing people are like, I don't know how to start that conversation, let alone do something about it. And of course, my worry is that we have to be doing something right now, and if we can't even talk about it, there is an issue. So this is top of mind for me and I think has huge implications for high schools, for sure, in America, which we've been pounding away for years now, about how they need to be redesigned. There's a lot of stuff going on out there. It's a really interesting moment in time.

**Michael Horn:**

**Yeah, that's super interesting. Just a quick reflection on it is I was talking to Scott Pulsifer recently, the president of Western Governors University, and for those that don't know, it's an online, competency-based university. And as he likes to say, we didn't invent competency-based education. No, you didn't. But I think they're the first players to do so at such scale that they do. And they had 230,000 enrollments in the last academic year that just completed Diane. And they now have I'm going to mess this up, but it's like 340 or 350,000 alums in their 23-year history. And just to put that in perspective, Harvard University has 400,000 alums.**

**And it was interesting because they're an online, competency-based institution, \$4,000 for every six months. So low cost. Students complete the bachelor's in an average of two and a half years. And he was just saying for the learners that come to them, which historically were adult learners, but increasingly, by the way, now 12%, I think, of their population,**

something like that, is 18- to 24-year olds. That's changing. Right. He said, for them, education is not the end. It is a means to a better life. Right.

And so I guess that's my reflection there is, I think, part of starting that conversation is like, what's the end? What are you trying to prepare for? And framing education as that vehicle as opposed to the oh, the purpose is college. Right? Because that's a pretty empty purpose once.

Diane Tavenner:

You get through it, right, and what we've all discovered or are discovering. Yeah, certainly lots on that one to dig in over the course of the year.

Michael Horn:

We're going to revisit that a few times, I suspect. All right, last one for me. You alluded to it a moment ago, which is jargon. And it comes directly out of this, though, conversation of the reading instruction and things of that nature, because I guess my reflection, Emily Oster, who's reading I love, or writing I love, she had this great piece recently about a harrowing incident for her. She got in an accident running on the road and she got hit by a biker and went to the ER and she was listening to all the doctors talking in jargon around her. And she said, sometimes jargon is sort of parodied, but it actually serves a really important purpose, which is it allows people to shortcut conversation and professionals in a field to very quickly communicate with each other to more efficiently get work done, she said. Now it can also alienate people outside of you and make them feel dumb, which then makes them feel like they don't understand and then a whole bunch of downstream effects of that, which is not good. But used well within the field, like in an emergency situation, it really short circuits right to the purpose and helps, in her case get the treatment that she needed to have. And so I guess my reflection was we also have a lot of jargon in education and I think the reading wars, in quotes, I can do this now because people can see me video, sorry for those listening to the audio, but we use a lot of jargon in education to try to signal certain things. But the problem within education, at least my reflection, and I'm curious, your take, is that we don't all mean the same thing by the words. We all have vastly different definitions. And so we'll have these fights like constructivists versus behaviorists. Or someone will be like, oh, we're an inquiry-based school, or we're a project-based learning school. Or direct instruction and let's just go back to the reading thing. There is direct instruction in that example, right, of teaching someone phonics and phonemic awareness. There is inquiry, I suppose, on the question what you're going to write about in Writers Workshop. There might even be hopefully a project with a performance at the end, like the actual completing right. There's some constructivist, there's some behaviorist. It's all a little bit right. And we set up these progressive education versus classical. We have these words, A, we don't know the definitions, but like, most of what we're doing is pulling from the right amount to get the right effect for the kid to help advance them. And so I just find a lot of these buzz phrases, at best counterproductive, but also potentially quite misleading, Diane, because we think we're saying the same thing when we are in communication and we're all just talking past each other. But I'd love your reflections.



Diane Tavenner:

I've had this experience hundreds of times over the last 20 years. I distinctly remember being on a panel at one point and having this conversation about the word knowledge versus skills. Yeah, that's another one levels and there is not a shared definition of that. And so people use those things interchangeably and they're different when you're talking about designing schools and learning experiences, et cetera, and it completely derailing any sort of meaningful understanding of what each other's are saying and therefore ability to move forward. So it's a very significant issue.

**Michael Horn:**

**Yeah, well, I guess my hope for schools is that we just start maybe doing more of the plain English thing so that parents know what we're talking about and then maybe we'll know what we're talking about as well and communicate better with each other.**

Diane Tavenner:

Well that's a good let's leave it there. Maybe this season to try to be.

**Michael Horn:**

**Yeah, that is a good question.**

Diane Tavenner:

As possible. I like that one. And you sort of mentioned at the top. But as we kind of wrap up this first welcome back session and look forward, I think we're both really excited for more interesting guests and people to talk to this year. And one of our favorite people is going to kick us off in our next episode. So we are excited to bring back Todd Rose. He joined us in season one and he's been doing a ton of fascinating work over the last few years. It's so relevant to everything we talk about and broader and so we're going to have a great conversation with him.

**Michael Horn:**

**Yeah, I can't wait. And it goes directly, I think, to the hot take you had around. If it's not four-year college, what are we preparing students for? Because what his research recently has shown is that everyone thinks that everyone else is aiming at four year college, but that's actually not the goal for a lot of the individuals themselves. And we'll talk about how he does that research, what he's found success actually means to individual families on the ground. I think it's going to be a terrific conversation to help set what should be a really exciting set of explorations for us and for our audience this season.**

Diane Tavenner:

On Class Disrupted. Well, I can't wait. Michael and I'm so glad to be back with you and until next time, thanks for joining us on Class Disrupted.