

2023 in Review: AI, New Assessments, “The American Dream,” and More

Diane and Michael look back on the past three episodes of Class Disrupted’s fifth season through the lens of disruption. They discuss the future of AI education tools; consider the opportunities and challenges as the Carnegie Foundation embarks on creating innovative new assessments with ETS; and highlight how Americans’ ideas of a success are changing and what that means for schools.

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Diane Tavenner:

Hey, Michael.

Michael Horn:

Hey, Diane. I know you have had a hectic last few weeks, but I still have been excited to catch up with you as we say goodbye to 2023. That still doesn't sound right coming off the tongue. And I'm hoping that the pneumonia cases in China that are starting to be reported are not portending something worse for 2024. But here we are.

Diane Tavenner:

Oh, Michael. Pneumonia in China. I don't even know what you're talking about. I don't want to know what you're talking.

Michael Horn:

Don't look it up.

Diane Tavenner:

I've been heads down. Wow. That makes me realize that we started this podcast during the pandemic, sort of the beginning, the height of the pandemic, and I can't believe we're in our fifth season. And I kind of feel like we're starting to see some opportunities that haven't been there for the last few years. And so I really hope pneumonia is not on our way because our kids and our system and our country really need us to be rethinking how we're doing school. For us this season, to that end, we've just been talking to some really interesting people and people who we think are kind of pushing our thinking and everyone's thinking and the work forward. And so that's been amazing. But one of the things I'm realizing is I'm craving the opportunity for us to just talk and process and think about what they're saying. So I'm hoping that we can do that today.

Michael Horn:

A good plan. And hopefully our listeners are excited for the same because that's what we're going to do: use today's session to step back and think about the last three conversations that we've had with Todd Rose, Irhum, Shafkat, hopefully I pronounced that correctly, and Tim Knowles, so that we can reflect on a lot of the points that they made and how they stretched our thinking and how they might intersect with each other and, frankly, ask each other any questions that we have as we march into the new year.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, that just is crazy. And I always have a lot of questions. So I'm excited to talk with you about this. But one of the things I noticed, Michael, when I think back across the last three conversations is there is an undercurrent of disruption in all of those. It's maybe more than an undercurrent, quite frankly. And while I will acknowledge that people in education don't really like the word disruption, they don't like it in reference to schools and education. And I get that. But I think it's useful to say it here, because when I say disruption, I'm referring to the work that you study and you write about and you talk about, and quite frankly, a lot of the work that I have done in my career, because innovation doesn't come without disruption. Those two things sort of come hand in hand. And so I think we need to be mindful, but we also can't be afraid to talk about what is really happening and needed.

Michael Horn:

I want to return to that theme as we go through today, but let's start where you just left, which is afraid and fear, and I think a lot of fear is being sparked by AI. And so would love to dig into the conversation as a starting point, if you're good with it, with Irhum, because my big takeaway from that was that the art of building valuable tools in education will firstly be based on a deeper understanding of what large language models the current AI phenomenon that has people's imagination, but really understanding what they can and can't do when you train them appropriately. And then second, and I think this is maybe reassuring for educators, I hope it is, the actual real life use cases in schools are the other thing you really need to understand. And what I took away from it was when you have both of those things, then you can create robust tools with presets in essence - that's sort of my word - but think scripted buttons instead of wide-open chats that you put a lot on the individual that support the things that you're trying to accomplish. And not only can that be more efficient, but it can also be much more valuable and efficacious. And I think it can lend toward a real purposeful use of AI, which is what I think we should all be hoping for. What did you take away from it, and how does that add up?

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, well, I want to linger on the combination of your two points together because I think this is a persistent issue in education and I've been thinking about it a ton. I think we've acknowledged this a lot. Education is one of the few industries that has been relatively unchanged by modern technological advances. And I'm not talking like printing press modern advances, clearly that had a significant impact, but that was a while ago now. And so I'm talking software, personal computing, and now AI obviously. The big question is why. Why is education sort of untouched or unfazed when everyone else is really impacted by these advances? And one of the things that I've been noticing over the last six months in being out of the direct working of and leading of schools is just how complicated schools are. And my beloved former board chair would call that a BGO, a blinding glimpse of the obvious. So there's that. But I think it's hit me pretty profoundly, kind of in two ways now that I'm leading a company that is focused on education, but not running a whole school or a whole system. You know that I'm a student of leadership, and I have studied and practiced for a very long time, and I love learning about it. And one of sort of the universally accepted truths in leadership is that an organization can only focus on, like, one, two, maybe three things at a time, and that's really stretching it. And really, the best organizations have that sort of laser focus. And for 20 years, I tried really hard to live that as truly as possible in schools. But the reality is that in a school, if we only had one or two priorities, we would literally be shut

down. Like, schools have so many obligations and responsibilities just to keep the doors open. It's not real to think that they only have one or two priorities. And you can play all these sort of Jedi mind tricks, if you will, and say, we're prioritizing here, but the reality is you're doing all of these other things that ultimately take priority because they're compliance oriented or they're legally mandated or all of those things. And so to pretend that those are not priorities really is not authentic. And so it's just really hit me to be leading an organization now that truly can have only one priority and what that actually means in terms of our ability to focus and to innovate and to really integrate new technologies and advances and think about how to use them in powerful and meaningful ways. And so I'm just thinking a lot about, and we come back to this theme a lot, like, can we expect of schools what I think everyone expects of them, which is to be these innovative places that are going to redesign and sort of remodel themselves using modern technology, AI in particular. It just feels like such a heavy, heavy lift. I'm dancing around this because I'm nervous about where this line of thinking takes me. And I think it's also important that we have this conversation.

Michael Horn:

Yeah. Reflecting on that, I guess I have a couple thoughts. One, our friend Paul Peterson, the professor at Harvard, who's studied and written a lot about education in schools, he has this line in his book, *Saving Schools*. I think that's the title of it, where he talks about, it's a very economist sort of view of the world where he says, like, one of the big things that creates innovation in the world is when organizations shift tasks to their end consumer. And the example he has is like Walmart. As opposed to a department store back in the day where you would have someone follow you around and curate the experience with you, like your shopper. Walmart's basically like, "Diane, you walk in there, figure it out. It's all on the shelves, but it's on you."

Diane Tavenner:

Well, now you even check yourself out, right?

Michael Horn:

That's a very good point. Look at the Amazon stores. And Whole Foods and stuff like that. And I think it's interesting in terms of education, because if we're serious about building agency and learners, actually having them take over things is actually good, like, that's a goal, right? I think so. A second thought I had is on the do one thing well in my head right now when you say that is Mallory Dwinnell, who's the chancellor, as you know, of Reach university. And I've been with

her a few times in the last few months, and she knows Reach University exists to do one thing and one thing only, and it's trained teachers in rural contexts. And as a result, they're able to be incredibly focused and optimized and so forth. When I zoom up from that a little bit, one of the lines that we've had - because I don't know the answer to your question, so I'm going to use theory here - through a jobs to be done perspective, the way we've said it is organizations can only really be good at one job to be done. So, for example, like Ikea, it's not that they do low-cost furniture, it's that they're really good at helping you do the job of, like, I need to furnish this apartment today when I move into a new city, right. And everything is built around that. They do lots and lots of things, but that's the job to be done, and they integrate around that. And I guess my reflection on that is, and I love your take on this, is that schools, as you know, we've been asking them to do multiple jobs. Like when we analyze this through why people switch schools, we've now done this with micro-schools, independent schools and charter schools. We see that there are four reasons or jobs to be done that cause people to change schools. And the design of those are pretty radically different depending on what job it is to get it done. And so I guess I wonder, to your point, have we just been forcing schools to do all the jobs and therefore they stink at all of them. And they're pulling against each other and maybe like moving back to a smaller-size school where we allow individuals to choose not based on race, politics, or other unsavory characteristics, but based on job to be done. Like what's the progress you're trying to make? Might that help us a little bit? I'll give you my other thought in a moment, but I just want you to react there.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah. And what you're making me think about is - this wasn't the current conversation we had with Todd Rose a few episodes ago - but certainly the body of his work, which is the introductory body, and you did *The End of Average*, which is why do we think that everyone needs the same thing. We're in this race where everyone's trying to be exactly the same, only a little bit better than everyone else on a very narrow set of things. And I think what you're offering is schools could have different purposes and look really different. And why is that bad or wrong? And the thing that's coming up for me and what you're saying though is the approach you're taking is that the school's actually primary purpose is to serve their students and their families. And here my experience is that's not who they're serving. When I talk about compliance and legality and all of those things, there's a whole bunch of other people that end up stack ranking above parents and students. And that is the fundamental - well, there's so many - but that feels like a fundamental challenge.

Michael Horn:

I'm going to point us to something really uncomfortable. But this is why I think some of these new school designs that are fundamentally focused on the learners and the parents are probably a really important force in education because they're not confused about who they're serving. And I think my hope would be that it helps districts wake up and be able to do the same sorts of things. But TBD on that one, I guess.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, districts, states, policy.

Michael Horn:

A lot of layers, right? Yeah, it's a lot of layers. So let's maybe leave that conversation there. I have other thoughts, but I think that's a good provocative place to leave it for the moment.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, I agree with you because there's another provocative space we can go. When we talked to Tim Knowles from the Carnegie foundation, he of course brought up one of my favorite topics, assessment and the promise of assessment to sort of enable a lot of what we talk about, which is competency-based and personalized and talk about student autonomy and self-direction and all of those things. Because if individuals can show what they know in valid and reliable ways, that frees up the space of how they actually learned that and how they know it and gives us a lot of different options and possibilities there. And if we're measuring things that are more directly related to valuable work people do in the world, that should both better prepare people and help clarify what things are valuable to teach and learn. And so I'm so curious. I know you went into that conversation like a little bit...

Michael Horn:

I'm nervous. I want them to really succeed. But I love both of your points. And I loved the broader conversation, as you know, with Tim. I left with a much clearer idea of what the partnership with ETS is trying to do and why. And I feel like when he anchored it in the why, it just helped so much. And I left with a deeper understanding of, to that end, why they're not tackling assessments for the learning standards as they exist today and are already in place, because there's so many players that do that, rightly or more wrongly, but nevertheless, there

and then I left with an understanding of why they are tackling these cognitive skills and habits of success. To use your language, Diane, not Tim's. And I like that the effort is demand driven. I think that's really important. There's some grassroots nature of it in the sense that, as Tim pointed out, all of these states, both red and blue, are building portraits of a graduate that at least pay lip service to the notion of developing students with agency and executive functioning skills and critical thinking on and on. But as he pointed out, they're kind of empty promises because those states have no way at the moment to measure these skills or habits or assess whether they're delivering. And so I like that Carnegie and ETS could be an answer to that problem where there really is none at the moment. And I think my questions from that, that sort of follow on for it, are one, or I guess, thoughts more broadly. And I have five of them. I'll do three maybe and then let you jump in. How about that? Okay. One, I really like the approach from a disruptive innovation angle, as I mentioned, because it tackles non-consumption, where the alternative is nothing at all at the moment. They are competing against nothing, rather than going headfirst into this heavy space of formative, summative interim assessment providers, and they can really define something. The performance bar in some sense is simple. All it has to do is be better than nothing. I said it earlier. Second, I think that they are chasing what seems like real demand. That's good. It's not top down. I hope we keep it that way and don't force something on people. And third, I think from a worry perspective, and this is going to contradict number one a little bit, but disruptive innovation, I think the theory suggests over and over again that you should tackle the simplest problems first. And I guess my concern is that figuring out how to assess these skills and habits in a way that is accepted outside of the school networks that exist doesn't feel simple to know. Your point that they can learn it anywhere and we're going to assess it. I know you've done this at Summit, but that's one network. And Carnegie is now trying to assess across a student's life, not just in school. That seems really complex and complicated to me, even if all the bar is is better than nothing. And so I guess I hope I'm wrong, but it's a question that I have coming out of the conversation.

Diane Tavenner:

I'm curious to pick your brain on that one a little bit about what constitutes simple, because it seems like what you're saying is the complexity might be coming from all these different contexts and things like that, less the actual assessment itself. And so I'm wondering, this is a little selfish too, as I think about trying to build a product that is in a space where there is non-consumption. I would argue there's non-consumption right now, but it's certainly not simple what we're trying to do at some level. But maybe it is. So what's simple mean?

Michael Horn:

Yeah, I have to think through this more obviously. I guess my thought is, right, just to go again to disruptive innovation, the first application for the transistors weren't computers and incredible consumer electronics products. They were simple hearing aids that just enabled some hearing. Steel. You take mini mills, they first did rebar, right, stuff that would show up in concrete, not finely finished, beautiful products. So maybe it's the case that they can find their niche there. I just think it's going to have to be sort of the simplest applications first of demonstrating these skills rather than taking on all the complexity at once and not trying to maybe, and I'm thinking out loud here, not trying to maybe bill it as like the, "Oh, we figured out how to measure perseverance across all domains and locations and et cetera, et cetera."

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, and maybe it's something like, I mean, you're referring back to some of the work that we did when I was at summit with some startup partners and, for example, we just were building one sort of easy simulation that felt like an hour of video game playing to students, but really was able to say, like, "Look, this student seems to indicate higher levels of the ability to collaborate to solve a more complex problem, which for an employer was super useful information." And so maybe something more, I would call them quick and dirty assessments like that that aren't about taking a whole assessment schema, but are like, if that helps an employer trust and believe that that potential employee is capable of a skill, maybe that's what simple looks like in this particular case.

Michael Horn:

I like that. I can imagine a second one which might be simply looking at student effort in school, right? Do they struggle in math? And then they keep at it. And so we see perseverance in mathematics, right? I could imagine sort of simple, not survey based, but more like observational based assessments maybe as well, I don't know.

Diane Tavenner:

Fascinating, but it's narrow and zeroed in on a particular thing that might be meaningful in the world but doesn't have to like...

Michael Horn:

To boil the ocean from day one, I think. I think that's exactly right. And that's maybe the way to think about it. Like, let's take some bite-sized pieces. I guess it bleeds into the other two thoughts I had. I really do like the way that they're connecting this to academic domains and content knowledge. I think I'd be concerned if they weren't. And here's my "and" I think they would benefit from taking a page from Summit and breaking out the skills or the cognitive skills versus the habits of success in the ways that you all did. Because they are different, and I suspect the approach to measuring them is different. Now, I grant you, from a public relations perspective, that might involve some education and some complicated messaging, but I think it would also be helpful for those of us in the field who are like, "Hey, agency is different from critical thinking in science." Or whatever it might be. And then I guess the last thought I had is, I do still wonder...I love that he's tackling this for all the reasons that he said. And I don't know if it pulls us away from the Carnegie Unit of time, because at some point we do still need to help say, "Hey, this student has mastered these sets of learning standards or progressions or whatever, and therefore can move on." And so maybe their role becomes sort of an arbiter of what is valid and reliable alternative forms of assessment, rather than trying to be the assessor itself. But it does seem to me like you have to solve the "Hey, I'm a student in math or I'm a student in ELA or I'm a student in civics or whatever it is." And by the way, I don't know that it has to be every academic domain, but that there's some way to sort of say like, "Yeah, if you master these bite-sized assessments or show this project or whatever else, that's a good demonstration." And therefore you can mark mastery of that as opposed to "Gee, sit in the seat for another year."

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, that's interesting. Two quick thoughts that are coming up for me. One is that seems like such a good historical role that that foundation has played where they start something and they kind of figure it out because they can, but then they don't own it and keep it. It moves out. You know, Tim in our conversation mentioned a whole bunch of different things that were actually started by Carnegie – including ETS – that spun out and continues to do the work. And the foundation then kind of moves on to putting some resources behind the initial thinking around. So that feels like a good potential role that they're playing. I'm going to say something that I think is going to shock you, which is because you know how much I hate the Carnegie Unit and the measurement of time and think it is just so ruining everything. But I will admit that in my new work, I have been really looking at post-high school young people, young adults, and how they figure out pathways besides a straight to four-year college

pathway. And one of the things I have encountered is time really matters to them, like how long is it going to take me to get a credential or a certificate or a degree or whatnot? Because that's a real calculation and factor in their lives. And to my great disappointment, we still have the Carnegie Unit, but it's no longer representative of a common unit of time. And so you go from college, mostly community college, to community college, and they all have these credits which are based on the Carnegie Unit, but they're all measuring different amounts of time and sometimes even within the same institution. And so the one potentially useful job for this unit is not even usable anymore to the user, and it actually can be misleading.

Michael Horn:

Wow. Okay, so that's fascinating. I'll let you transition us to Todd in a second. But one quick thought is I do think rate matters through these different things that we expect. It's one of the reasons I think Joel Rose's work at New Classrooms has always been so interesting because they have this notion of, they probably call it something different now, but it was originally par. Like, how many times or days does it take for a student to learn a particular concept? And you're sort of above par or below par. You all at summit had the. Are you on track? Ahead of track. And so I do think it's not, that time is not relevant. And Paul LeBlanc makes this point beautifully in his writing, which is, frankly, those who have low incomes, they have the biggest deficit of all, which is not just money, it's time poverty. And so that's a very relevant number, and it's not a number that the Carnegie unit helps us with at all. And in fact, it disadvantages them further I think.

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah. Well, note to me and to others that time, we can't just totally do away with time as we really try to rethink this, that it is, as you point out, an important factor, and we need to think about that. So, learn something every day. Michael, I was having this super interesting conversation with the parents of a Gen Zer, and they're particularly interesting because they also have two millennial children, and they feel like there's a real difference between the two. That's a different conversation. But they were in their sort of conversation, talking about how their perception that their Gen Z daughter has really got a different definition of success than they do, than is familiar to them, and that they understand. And this is causing some tension. And I shared Todd's work that he shared with us, and I was, you know, I think you've got your finger on the pulse of what's happening in America according to Todd's work, which is there is an evolving, changing definition of success. And the response I got back was, well, if

you're someone who hasn't been reading that work, it can be a very jarring experience. I just thought it was such an interesting grounding of what Todd was talking about and what that actually means in families and across generations. And I don't know that I want to go here, but we're at a moment in time where there's just societally so much anger and angst and division. And it did make me wonder if this generational divide along these lines might be underneath some of that. So I'm curious what you think, what you thought about Todd's...

Michael Horn:

Wow. As always, I'm so impressed with Todd. But just to stay where you were. And then I have a question for you, I do think, and I'll go here, because obviously the Israel-Palestine stuff has really been on my mind, as you know. And I'm going down rabbit holes every single day on it. I've been really struck by how, when you provide some basic level of education to younger people, all of a sudden phrases that they thought were innocuous, they realize, "Oh, that might be really harmful in a way I hadn't understood before." And so I guess my thought is, I think we have to hear and honor from where they're coming because there's some real good there in terms of, like, if they're resetting definitions of success. And that doesn't mean we as educators should back off grounding them in some of the things that we know to help inform that conversation. And that's sort of our role, I think. Not sort of - that is our role. David Gergen always loves saying education literally means lead forth. And that's how I might think about it here. But let me ask you a different question - you may want to reengage with that one - but let me ask you a different question, which is you said disruptive innovation pervades all three. I get the first two, and I think our audience do. I'd love to hear your thinking on how this one does as well.

Diane Tavenner:

Well, thanks for keeping me honest, as you always do. And I might loop back because this might just be too rich of a week in the news to pass by. Okay, so I did say it was a theme across all three. This might be a stretch, but this is sort of how I was thinking about it. I think we're living in an era that we are moving out of. And I think this changing definition of success is related, where education has sort of been perceived as the end, if you will, versus the means. And for, I think, most of our nation's history, which is not that long, but still, education was a means to an end. And one of the things I think we're hearing from younger generation, especially coming out of the pandemic, is like, and this is related to their disillusionment with higher ed. And a lot of what Todd was talking about is like, I need a job. I need a career. I need to be able to support my family. I need to have a life. I don't want to go into debt. I don't want to get a degree that gets me a job that doesn't actually pay for itself.

And I don't know that they use ROI, but there's not an ROI on what my education is. And so, if we take that, and I think that suggests a shift to what you're doing in education, what really matters is what you're learning and the skills you're building. And that I think necessitates pretty disruptive changes in our learning models and our schools and the experience. And again, these are the things we're always advocating for. But I think this takes us back to the root of why we're advocating for it, because I think you and I actually are embracing that changing definition of success. And I'll speak for myself, it's also hard because I have benefited from the old definition and that was an undercurrent of that conversation I was having with these parents who have been very successful by conventional definitions, and that's hard to let go of. And that some of that tension underlying these conversations with younger folks. And I will connect it back because I just can't resist. Who knows? By the time we release this, this might be all over and done, but we are sitting right in the moment where I can't help but say it. Three top university presidents were called to Congress to testify. I will note that they were all women. And the vast majority of top 50 presidents are not women, they are men. So I'm curious about that. But that's a separate side story. One has already resigned for her comments. The second is under massive pressure. There's so much going on here in this whole conversation. But for me, the interesting pieces, and I think it's tying back to what you were just talking about, which is what is the role of an institution that is designed to educate young people? I think at the heart of why people, there's so many reasons why they were unhappy with what the president said. But one of them is where's your responsibility to actually take a stand and guide and mentor and do exactly what you just said, Michael? Educate them about the things they don't know about because, yeah, they're brilliant and they're young, but they don't know a whole bunch of stuff yet. And that's our job. And so where are you in that equation, I think is the question that's being called of those educators.

Michael Horn:

No, that is brilliant. It reminds me, a friend of mine, Gunner Councilman, used to always say students are much more like clients than customers. And his distinction was that clients are often wrong. It's your job as the organization is to guide them. And whereas we have the saying the customer is always right. That's not really true with students. And so I think that's interesting. On the second one, another point you made about the changing sort of framework of education where for a while a place where I went, Harvard, was seen as like success. That was the destination, if you will. And that was a big finding, as you know, from my Choosing College book was how many individuals were like, they wanted to get into the top college for its own sake. They had no sense of what came afterwards. It was just like that was the prize. A lot of admissions officers did not like that that was the prize. But that's how they thought about it.

And we just did a Future U podcast recording with a couple folks from Wake Technical Community College and Portland State. And one of them made the point that increasingly people see college as a station, not a destination. I thought that was a really good language to sort of capture this shift. And I guess finally I'll say, I see your point. Like disruptive innovations fundamentally, in the words of the theory, change the Y axis of performance, as we like to say in Wonkland. So in normal speak, it just means that the way we think about performance changes, like what we measure and value, and that's what disruptive innovations fundamentally do. And frankly, traditional organizations really struggle with those changes because they've organized, to your much earlier point about how schools are complicated places, they've organized themselves around one set of things that we have measured and valued, and disruption tends to change that in line with new individuals that haven't been served. So I take your point. It's a really interesting one. Maybe let's leave this conversation here for now, because I think it makes for a juicy '24 as we go in. But as we wrap up, let's just sort of round out the 2023 year. It occurs to me, by the way, in future years, maybe we'll look back at our year and name some of our top reads and things that we've watched. But I am not in the mood for that at the moment. I will be totally honest. So I'm just sort of curious what's on your TV at the moment or your bedside table that you're reading at the moment?

Diane Tavenner:

Yeah, well, I will definitely answer that, and I will just say, I'm so glad we had this conversation because I have so many questions for us to explore in the new year and so many people popping in my mind that I really want to talk to now based on this conversation. So I'm very excited to hang up here and then start brainstorming with you for the new year. So I think you had this moment, too. When we interviewed Tim and asked him this question, he said that between December 1 and January 1 he always reads poetry. And I think we both were like, whoa. And so I took that as an invitation and have been reading - this summer I got to meet a poet, David Wyatt - and I've been reading some of his poems and pieces, and he's got this one, I'm going to mess up the title, but where he takes words and he just really has a whole contemplation on the meaning of that word that is just like, so mind shifting. And so that's been really fun. And on my bedside table. How about you?

Michael Horn:

That's good. And good for you to actually follow the advice. I have not because in classic sort of efficiency mode, I'm like, but there are a few other books I need to read first. So that said, I've put aside Klossovitz for the moment. It's just I've not made the progress that perhaps I had

hoped for and have delved into a few different books, one of which I finished over the weekend. And it's called *Writing for Busy Readers: Communicate More Effectively in the Real World*. It's by a friend at Harvard, Todd Rogers, and another professor or member of the community, Jessica Lasky-Fink. And it's a good, quick read and some good tips as I'm finishing up my next book on helping people better navigate the job market. And so, I will say their big messages, not surprising, are less is more. And so, with that wish, maybe for brevity, levity, clarity and charity in the new year, I'll just say, thank you, Diane. And thank you to all of those tuning in for joining us on Class Disrupted.