The Acton Academy Model

In their book, Disrupting Class, Professor Clayton Christensen of Harvard Business School and his colleagues Michael Horn and Curtis Johnson claimed that online learning is a disruptive innovation that will transform the way the world learns. Disruptive innovations follow an S-curve pattern, they said. The new technology creeps into the market slowly at first, as messy prototypes emerge. But then the substitution of the new technology for the old rises dramatically, until, finally, it approaches 100 percent of the market. S curves are sometimes gradual, sometimes steep. When Disrupting Class was published in 2008, its authors were uncertain as to the slope of the curve that they expected. But one thing they knew: Online learning was following the pattern of a disruptive innovation. One day it would replace traditional classroom instruction. That prediction was radical. Up until then, online learning was mostly a fringe alternative in K–12 education, embraced by homeschooling families who were okay with being "distance learners," remote from campus. By the time I joined the Clayton Christensen Institute a few years later, however, the S curve was beginning to veer up, thanks to the arrival of blended learning—the combination of online learning and brick-and-mortar schooling. By 2011, we counted forty school districts, charter school networks, independent schools, and virtual schools in the United States that were delivering blended learning rather than traditional instruction.

One of the forty was an unusual micro-school in Austin, Texas, called Acton Academy. At first my interest in Acton Academy was entirely academic. Along with the thirty-nine other pioneering organizations, Acton Academy was steepening the slope on the S curve right before our eyes. Distance learning had reached a plateau. For online learning to get any bigger, it would need to take on some of the jobs that brick-and-mortar schools do—jobs like providing custodial care, face-to-face mentoring, social experiences, and sports. By combining the disruptive innovation of online learning with select elements of the incumbent system, these forty organizations were following the disruptive innovation playbook to the letter. A few, including Acton Academy, had business models that were primed to scale well. That was important. It meant that the trajectory for the disruption was on path. What was once a radical prediction now had forty live examples to manifest that the heralded transformation of brick-and- mortar schools had begun—and was poised for growth. What's more, Acton Academy stood out from the others. It had a "Flex" blended-learning model, in which online learning is the backbone of much of the core instruction and the primary role of the face-to-face teacher is to guide, encourage, and activate learning, not to deliver instruction. Several other schools among the forty had Flex models, but Acton Academy was the only one that figured out how to do a Flex model with elementary-aged children. Finding Acton Academy was like spotting Bigfoot.

Fast-forward several years and Acton Academy continues to be a decade ahead of the rest. Although thousands of schools today have disruptive, blended models, Jeff and Laura Sandefer's school—which has become a global network—stands apart for its unusually successful and counterintuitive approach to doing school. According to Christensen, one benefit of disruptive innovations is that they distribute access to people at the margins. Imagine a series of concentric circles. Each circle represents a population of people who can access a product or service. Only people with the most wealth and expertise have access at the center. The larger circles represent people with less wealth and expertise; most everyday folks live out here. Disruptive innovations push access to this outer rim. Think TurboTax and Amazon Prime, for example—two disruptions that push access out to the average Joes. From their tiny original schoolhouse, the Sandefers intuited that the disruptive innovation of online

learning has similar power to push out access to the people with the very least wealth and expertise of all—children. That insight allowed them to pioneer several breakthrough school design choices. Most importantly, Acton Academy empowers children with the habits, mentors, online lessons, and tracking system that they need to be able to manage their own learning. That delegation of control helps the children develop agency—the ability to make choices. Observe Acton Academy for a scant minute and the first thing you'll notice is the stunning sense of student buy-in and self-efficacy. It's because of all that agency. Giving students ownership, in turn, frees up adults to serve as guides and mentors. It flips the mentor-to-student ratio from 1-to-many to 1-to-1. Children don't get lost at Acton Academy. Human connection overflows from the system as the entire community works together to decide on the rules, sign off on each other's badges, peer-critique projects, and build cool things.

A few months after finishing that early blended-learning report, I scheduled a visit to Acton Academy and brought along my husband, Allan. That's when things became personal. It's one thing to understand Acton Academy in theory. It's another thing entirely to step inside its walls and feel with one's heart what sound design, true principles, and lovely execution do for the well-being and joyfulness of children.

Taken from the forward to "Courage to Grow: How Acton Academy Turns Learning Upside Down" by Laura Sandefer