Disrupting education

Daniel Xerri calls for a sea change in education in general – and ELT in particular.

Recently, at two different events, I listened to well-known speakers discussing the notion that present-day education has to be 'disrupted'. Disruption was described as a mechanism for generating a personalised education system for all students, as well as a means by which to align education with the 21st-century realities in operation in most industries. Disrupting education in these two ways has important implications for the English language classroom, especially since, as Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn and Curtis Johnson point out, not all of the 1.5 billion learners of the language globally are benefiting from a personalised learning experience that hones their skills, capabilities and attitudes in such a way as to make their respective countries' economies prosperous and competitive.

Knowledge

The speakers at both the events I attended identified a number of chronic problems with the main model of education implicitly in operation in some contexts around the world. This model is typically equated with the one that existed in the 19th century and which is still all too familiar: with the emphasis placed on the acquisition of knowledge in lockstep fashion in school classrooms where the teacher is the fount of all knowledge and the students are blank slates to be filled. Such a model encourages a power dynamic of inequality, given the presumed disparity in knowledge between the two parties. Moreover, the weight given to knowledge trumps everything else, especially since this knowledge is prioritised by the high-stakes tests that students are prepared for at school.

The cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, entrepreneurship and other significant skills and competences is obviated because the system is not adequately equipped for them. Hence, some students leave school lacking the capacity to contribute effectively to a range of jobs that require employees to demonstrate such qualities.

Innovation and education

At the NILE@21 Conference in Norwich, UK, Jeremy Harmer's opening plenary referred to the theory of disruptive innovation, in order to drive home the message that education is in urgent need of improvement if it is to provide students with an

> Education is in urgent need of improvement if it is to provide students with an experience that is intrinsically motivating

experience that is intrinsically motivating. Clayton Christensen, the originator of this theory, sees disruption as a force for good, with the potential to enhance students' educational experience. He defines disruption as *'the process by which an innovation transforms a market whose services or products are complicated and expensive into one where simplicity, convenience, accessibility, and affordability characterize the industry'*. Education as it currently exists in some global contexts matches the first part of this definition in that it is often a cumbersome and inefficient system, despite the huge amounts of money pumped into it.

In Christensen, Horn and Johnson's book, it is argued that disruption in education would entail the customisation of every student's learning experience, mainly via the use of digital technology. Standardised ways of teaching and testing run counter to the need to customise learning. In order for schools to implement customisation, they *'need to move away from the monolithic instruction of batches of students toward a modular, student-centric approach using software as an important delivery vehicle'*. It is yet to be seen whether online learning and the use

of technology will disrupt the traditional educational model to such an extent that it will be displaced. However, the value that disruptive innovation places on the personalised learning experience is indicative of the need for us to identify the best means by which we can gradually bring this kind of education into the mainstream.

Reality and education

At an event entitled 'Disrupting the Class', Evarist Bartolo, Malta's Minister for Education and Employment, spoke about how the present educational model is still very similar to the 19th-century military model that conceived it. In the latter, students are not taught to question why, but to do and die. Reward is associated with conformity, rather than with critical thinking, creativity and entrepreneurship. Students who think outside the box are not praised, but punished. Such an educational model is inward-looking and institutionalised; outside influences are shunned. In order to disrupt this model, changes need to be effected in content, pedagogy and assessment. And all three factors have to change for disruption to be effective. All three are powerful levers that work in conjunction with each other to determine the shape of education.

Bartolo also voiced his belief that there is a need for stronger networks between schools, their communities and different industries. It is important that industries should have a say in young people's education since they are at the receiving end of the schooling process. In fact, Bartolo maintained that *'we need to contaminate education with as much reality as possible'*. Nonetheless, prudence needs to be exercised when it comes to disruption in education. To rush educational change is unwise. While disruption is necessary, it needs to happen gradually and in a systematic manner.

Matt Robb from Parthenon, a strategy consultancy firm servicing the global education sector, claimed that employers need to have a say in what education looks like, especially if they want their employees to be useful to them on the job from Day 1 of their employment. Encouraging employers to be involved in shaping education in contexts where there are good employment opportunities is pivotal for an economy to thrive. This can be done via dual studies in school and work settings, employer-recognised qualifications, and the use of online and blended learning.

Robb acknowledged that the undersupply of adequately-skilled personnel is critical for some industries. However, to criticise education as being wholly responsible for a skills mismatch is not entirely fair. Education and industry have different purposes, and the former is not designed merely to churn out workers. Hence, it is important for employers and teachers to find a common language, without losing sight of the fact that education is meant to do much more than prepare students for the realities of the workplace.

Society and education

Education can never fully predict a society's future needs, and hence it is important to develop students as holistically as possible, rather than only training them for the niche requirements of any particular industry or career. This seems to be in line with something that Albert Einstein once said: *'I want to oppose the idea that the school has to teach directly that special knowledge and those accomplishments which one has to use later directly in life. The demands of life are much too manifold to let such a specialized training in school appear possible … The development of general ability for independent thinking and judgement should always be placed foremost.'*

Einstein seems to have believed in the value of a holistic education that doesn't so much prepare young people for a specific career but, more importantly, develops their intellect and sensibility in such a way that they are able to adapt to the fluid nature of the future.

Teaching

While it is crucial to 'contaminate' education with the realities of the world outside the classroom by making use of the contribution of the industries that directly benefit from well-trained students, education needs to be disrupted even further than that. Perhaps the most important form of disruption that needs to be effected should be geared towards developing young people's critical thinking, creativity and concomitant skills and competences, so that they are able to function effectively in any career they might choose to embark on, as well as in any other life domain. This would entail displacing standardised forms of teaching and testing with the provision of a personalised learning experience for each and every student.

◆ ◆ ◆

Within the context of ELT, the development of language proficiency can be used as a means of fostering the other key skills and competences considered desirable by employers and society in general. A personalised language learning experience can serve to cultivate such qualities as critical thinking, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, rather than just communicative ability. If language teaching were to be restricted to the development of proficiency, we would be depriving our students of an opportunity for a more holistic education. Besides the ability to communicate in English, students entering the workplace in the 21st century need to use language for a variety of purposes that expect them to demonstrate more than mere proficiency. ■

Christensen, C M, Horn, M B and Johnson, C W *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* McGraw Hill 2008

Einstein, A *Ideas and Opinions* Crown Publishers 1954

Daniel Xerri is a lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, the Joint Coordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG and the chairperson of the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta.

daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt