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The dilution of precise concepts

5-6 minutes

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So many new terms and concepts are so quickly diluted in the sea of public discourse. “Disruption”, “pivot”, “refactor” ... all had precise, technical meanings; all have been picked up and tossed about so loosely by casual observers that they stretch into unrecognizability.

Why does this happen?

I wrote about those three examples [almost a decade ago](#). Just to look briefly at them and others:

“Disruptive”

- Meaning: a type of innovation that is [better along a new axis but worse along the axes existing customers care about](#) (distinguished from “sustaining”)
- Usage: any big change to an industry

“Pivot”

- Meaning: [modifying your product/market based on what you learned about customers from previous iterative experiments](#)
- Usage: making any change whatsoever, including completely resetting everything about your business

“Refactor”

- Meaning: [making a small, behavior-preserving transformation to code](#)
- Usage: making any change to code driven by engineering rather than product concerns, including rewriting your entire codebase

“MVP”

- Meaning: the very first iteration of a product or concept that [allows you to learn about customers and the market](#)
- Usage: the first product you launch
- Or worse: a shitty version of your product that you put out because you’re a hack who doesn’t care about quality

“Lean startup”

- Meaning: an agile approach to finding product-market fit where you [rapidly iterate on both with feedback from customers](#)
- Usage: not raising much money
- Or worse: a wimpy approach for losers who don’t have guts and a bold vision

“Agile”

- Meaning: a little unclear, some vague stuff that was in [a manifesto](#) about “people over process”
- Usage: a set of superficial formalities like stand-up meetings and empty terms like “stories” and “sprints”

- Ought to mean: iterative development with user feedback

“Story” (scrum)

- Meaning: a small slice of product specification, phrased in terms of the user experience
- Usage: any task you put in Jira

“Product/market fit”

- Meaning: unclear, “[you can always feel when it is/isn’t happening](#)”, basically you have a good product and it’s growing fast organically
- Usage: a magical point you hit where you’re gonna win, alternately “I want you to think my startup is doing well”

Why does this happen?

Often, it’s because understanding the concept depends on a whole theory and framework of ideas and observations around it, which most people don’t have. People like Clayton Christensen ([RIP](#)) and Eric Ries are careful thinkers who are making technical distinctions in an area before most people have even noticed the world of phenomena they’re observing. If you haven’t looked deeply at innovation and competition, or wondered why incumbents navigate some technology transitions easily and other times get overthrown by upstart new entrants, you won’t have the background to even understand “sustaining” vs. “disruptive” innovation. If you haven’t struggled through the early, pre-product/market fit phase of a startup, or stumbled through transitions after your initial concept fails, you can’t understand the difference between a “pivot” and a “jump”.

Sometimes there isn’t even a word for the wider category. “Pivot” and “jump” are two types of ... what? What’s the genus? “Change”? Same with “refactor”. So in people’s minds the concept snaps to a higher level of generality, which is the only place it can fit. “Pivot” and “refactor” both just come to mean “change”.

Sometimes the concept wasn’t very clearly defined in the first place. I blame “agile” and “product/market fit” for this. Then they quickly come to mean whatever anyone wants them to mean (i.e., they mean almost nothing).

Sadly, I don’t know what to do about this. Concepts run away from their inventors and take on a life of their own. It’s natural and organic, determined by some laws of memetic evolution no one can directly control.

Is there any way to protect our technical concepts? Or at least to guide their evolution? What should pioneering thinkers do to communicate their ideas intact to a broad audience? What are successful examples?

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