

Effortless English

Thriving On Chaos

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"It is easy to understand why many teachers revert to textbooks or worksheets when things around them are in constant, challenging motion, but they must learn to be in motion, too. The students are being loud; they are having a hard time paying attention to each other; they are having a hard time paying attention to the teacher. We all know that telling students to turn to page 37 and answer the questions can relieve chaos and make the room quieter for a time. I've recently heard of a new trend of teachers using wireless microphones in an effort to keep students' attention and be heard above the other noise in the classroom. Education is not about who can speak the loudest. It's about the students and teacher wanting to listen to each other. A truly personalized, small school allows that to happen.

Another reason I look to my friend Tom Peters for ideas on how to deal with the tough moments is because he entitled one of his books "Thriving on Chaos". Tom told me it took him a long time to land on that word "thriving". But he was looking for a way of saying you must be ready for and enjoy the process of change. Our schools must be thriving environments, thriving on the chaos and on the beauty. We all need to re-examine our situations from time to time and make sure we are not sticking to old patterns in new situations."

--Dennis Littky

I like the phrase "Thriving on Chaos". As we all know, the world is constantly changing and its changing quickly. Science, education, travel, technology, and human relationships are evolving rapidly. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming.

In fact, many people do become overwhelmed by the pace of change. They may become depressed. They may dig in and become very conservative in an effort to stop.... or at least slow the change. Some people even become quite bitter about it. Others try to keep up, but can't.

Without a doubt, human societies have changed. Its no longer possible to

revert: v. go back to
challenging: adj. difficult
motion: n. movement
having a hard time: idiom. experiencing a difficult situation
relieve: v. cure, make better
chaos: n. constant & unpredictable change
trend: n. something many people are doing, something that is popular
microphones: n. device that increases sound volume
personalized: individualized, made for each person
tough: adj. difficult
entitled: v. named
thriving: v. growing successfully, living and growing in a healthy way
to land on: idiom. to decide to use, to choose (after considering many choices)
sticking to: v. staying with, continuing to do or use
evolving: v. changing with the environment, changing to survive or thrive
rapidly: adv. quickly, fast
overwhelming: adj. too much to handle (too much emotion, too much information. etc.)
pace: n. speed, rate
depressed: adj. very sad
dig in: idiom. to resist change, to fight against change
conservative: adj. doesn't like change or differences
bitter: adj. very angry and frustrated for a long time (ie. months and years)
to keep up: v. to stay equal with, to not fall behind

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reasonable: adj. intelligent, good
a recipe for failure: idiom. something that will cause failure
to enhance: v. to improve

antithetical: adj. opposite, paradoxical

principles: n. very general values or guidelines to live by

inflexible: adj. not easy to change

limiting: adj. prevent change, action, or growth

adapt: v. change with the situation, change to survive and thrive

circumstances: n. situations

commitment: n. a strong decision to do something, a strong loyalty

respectful: adj. showing politeness and courtesy

adaptable: adj. changeable, able to survive new situations

society: n. all people in a country or culture

tumultuous: adj. quickly changing, chaotic

age: n. time period, period in history

reflection: n. thought, deep thinking about the past or present

theoretical: adj. concerned with ideas

abstract: adj. with ideas only, not real or concrete, thought only

debate: n. discussion, argument

concrete: adj. real, solid, in the real world (can be seen, touched, etc.)

grounded in: idiom. connected to

caught up in: idiom. obsessed with, thinking too much about

speculation: n. theory, guessing

tremendous: adj. big

advantage: n. something that is helpful, something that helps

consequences: n. results, effects

discover: v. find, realize

innovation: n. creative change, change and improvement

label: v. name, call

so-called: idiom. called, named (by adding "so", you suggest that you don't agree with the name)

thrive by doing things the way they have always been done. "We've always done it that way" is no longer a reasonable explanation. In fact, it's an excuse that is a recipe for failure.

So how can we thrive on chaos? How do we not only survive these rapid changes, but learn to enjoy them? How do we use change to enhance our lives?

It may seem antithetical, but one of the key ways to thrive on change is to have a set of unchanging principles. A principle is not a rule. Rules are inflexible. They are limiting. They slow us down and make it hard for us to adapt quickly when circumstances change. Principles, on the other hand, are highly adaptable. A principle is a general value -- a commitment to something that is deep and meaningful. "I must always shake hands when I meet a new person" is a rule. If you meet a Japanese person and you have this rule, you may become confused. "I will try always be kind and respectful" is a principle.

Principles are easily adaptable to new circumstances because principles are generally not concerned with specific actions or details. There are many ways to show respect, for example. In the past, schools, companies, and individuals often focused on rules. The problem is, students, employees, society, and individuals have changed. The old rules don't work anymore. What we need to thrive in this tumultuous age are deep principles-- and the flexibility to change the way we follow them.

Another vital skill for this age of chaos is reflection. Reflection means thinking deeply about something-- usually yourself, your life, and your actions. Many people have been taught to first think, then act. But I think its better to do the opposite-- first act, then think. If you think first, it's easy to get lost in a theoretical world of abstract ideas. The education field is full of these kinds of people. They think, talk, write, and debate-- but its all theory-- all in their head. These people actually have no idea what is happening in the world and what would happen if they tried something new.

If you act first, however, you then have something concrete to think about. Your thinking is grounded in the real world. When you act first, its harder to become caught up in speculation. Another tremendous advantage to acting first is that actions often have surprising consequences. When we think, we often believe we have thought of every possibility. But then, to our surprise, we discover that lots of unexpected things happen when we actually try something new.

These surprises are the seeds of innovation and creativity. Unimaginative people often label the surprises as "failures"-- simply because the results were not as expected. But in the words of Tony Robbins, there are no failures-- there are only results. In fact, so-called failures are often more valu-

reinforces: v. strengthens, makes stronger

discard: v. to throw away, get rid of

rigid: adj. not soft and flexible, hard to bend, hard to change

churning: v. mixing

hyper speed: adj. VERY fast

to stick to: v. stay with, stay loyal to

embrace: v. hug, accept happily

to enjoy the ride: idiom. to enjoy the process, to enjoy the whole experience (not just the end result).

able than what most consider success. Failure gives you new ideas and new input. "Success" often just reinforces your old ideas.

And so, to truly thrive on chaos, we must act first and then think. We must also discard labels such as "failure" and "success" and instead think in terms of "interesting results", "possibilities", and "opportunities".

The time for rigid, rule-centered thinking was 100 years ago. In the churning, hyper speed digital age-- the only way to thrive is to stick to your principles, act without fear, and embrace interesting failures. Those who thrive on chaos are those who learn to enjoy the ride.

Learn More:

[Tom Peters Business Blog](http://www.tompeters.com)

<http://www.tompeters.com>

[Dennis Littky's Schools](http://www.bigpicture.org/aboutus/philosophy.htm)

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