Teaching guide: The best thing since sliced bread — adoption and diffusion

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At a glance

Episode	The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread
Length	About 24 minutes (full episode)
Best-fit audiences	Undergraduate and MBA innovation/strategy modules; executive education and corporate L&D on technology adoption and change; coaches working on go-to-market; upper-secondary economics or business classes
Time options	50-minute session, 90-minute session, or half-day workshop (all below)

Learning outcomes. By the end, learners should be able to:

- **Explain** Rogers' diffusion-of-innovations theory and its five perceived attributes of an innovation.
- **Apply** the five-attribute framework to score a real innovation, or an organisation's own AI tool, for adoption readiness.
- **Analyse** why some proven ideas — boiled water, citrus against scurvy — failed to spread despite strong evidence.
- **Evaluate** the respective roles of the inventor, the user and the organisation in making an innovation actually work.
- **Design** one intervention that would improve an innovation's adoption prospects in a learner's own context.

Key concepts: diffusion of innovations; the S-curve and adopter categories; the five perceived attributes; innofusion and user innovation; tacit knowledge.

Before the session

What learners watch or read: the full episode (about 24 minutes), or the 5-minute highlights video if time is short; the show notes for the five-attribute framework, sources and story check.

Pre-work questions:

1. Think of a product or technology you resisted for a long time and then adopted. What changed your mind?

2. Name one "obviously good" idea in your own field that hasn't caught on. Why not, as far as you can tell?

The question ladder

Understand

1. **What are Rogers' five attributes of an innovation, and what does each mean?** *Good answer:* relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability, each defined in one line. *Common misconception:* conflating "relative advantage" with simply being new, rather than being better in a way users notice. *If stuck:* "Which of the five would make you try something once? Which would make you keep using it?"
2. **Who was Otto Rohwedder, and what went wrong before 1928?** *Good answer:* a jeweller with an idea from around 1912; a 1917 factory fire destroyed his blueprints; years to rebuild; bakers were sceptical throughout. *Common misconception:* assuming the idea succeeded immediately, because the eventual outcome (a 2,000% sales rise) is dramatic. *If stuck:* "How many years passed between the idea and the first sale?"

Apply

3. **Score sliced bread against the five attributes. Which, if any, is weakest?** *Good answer:* close to five out of five; complexity only becomes an issue at scale, which is exactly why Papendick's fix mattered. *Common misconception:* scoring the machine itself rather than the experience of the adopting family. *If stuck:* "Would a family have had to change anything about breakfast to use it?"
4. **Apply the same five attributes to the Los Molinas boiled-water case. What's different?** *Good answer:* strong relative advantage (health) but weak compatibility (local "hot/cold" beliefs) and weak observability within trusted networks. *Common misconception:* assuming weak uptake means weak evidence, when the health case was fine. *If stuck:* "Who did the health worker talk to, and who didn't she reach?"

Analyse and evaluate

5. **Why did the US government's 1943 wartime ban on sliced bread fail within seven weeks?** *Good answer:* once adopted, an innovation becomes part of daily life; removing it is felt as a loss, and the public backlash was strong enough to reverse policy. *Common misconception:* assuming the ban failed for supply reasons rather than public reaction. *If stuck:* "What does the backlash tell you about how 'installed' sliced bread already was by 1943?"
6. **Compare Rohwedder (the inventor) and Papendick (the user who fixed the tray problem). Who contributed more, and does that question even make sense?** *Good answer:* an open question; look for answers that separate "making it possible" from "making it work at scale" — both were necessary. *Common misconception:* treating the inventor as the sole hero of the story. *If stuck:* "Would the slicer have succeeded nationally without the tray?"
7. **Evaluate the claim: "If AI isn't delivering value in most companies yet, it's because the technology isn't good enough."** *Good answer:* use the episode's own evidence (MIT's "learning gap"; PwC's manager/non-manager usage gap) to challenge the claim, and connect it to the five-attribute and tacit-knowledge lessons. *Common misconception:* treating adoption and technical

quality as the same variable. *If stuck:* "What does the gap between executives and staff tell you about why AI usage is uneven?"

Create

8. **Design one change to how an organisation introduces a new tool, drawing on at least two lessons from this episode.** *Good answer:* a concrete intervention tied explicitly to named concepts — for example, a visible "neighbour's corn" champion, or a deliberately trialable pilot. *Common misconception:* vague "communicate better" answers with no link back to the framework. *If stuck:* "Which of the five attributes is weakest in what you're trying to introduce, and what one change would raise it?"
9. **If you were advising Nelida, the Los Molinas health worker, in the 1950s, what would you do differently, using Rogers' ideas?** *Good answer:* work through trusted, central community members rather than marginal ones; reframe boiled water to fit existing belief categories rather than against them. *Common misconception:* suggesting "more evidence" or "better posters," ignoring the social-channel problem. *If stuck:* "Who in the village did people already trust and copy?"

Challenges

1. **Warm-up (10 minutes).** In pairs, list every innovation you can think of that is "obviously better" but still hasn't caught on around you. Pick one and score it against the five attributes.
2. **Main task (45–60 minutes in class, or homework).** Write a one-page adoption plan for a real innovation you know — a tool at work, a teaching method, an app — using the five attributes, the innofusion lesson, and one named "neighbour's corn" moment you could create.
3. **Take-away project (1–2 weeks).** Research one historical case, not covered in the episode, of an innovation that failed to spread despite strong evidence (a workplace safety practice, a public-health measure, a piece of software). Present a five-attribute diagnosis and one intervention that might have changed its fate.

Activities

Small groups — jigsaw (3–5 per group, 20 minutes + 10-minute debrief). Split into five groups, each becoming the expert on one Rogers attribute. Each group applies its attribute to both sliced bread and one contrast case (Los Molinas or scurvy), then regroups to compare notes. *Debrief:* Which attribute varied most between the two cases? What surprised you?

Large groups or lecture — live poll (15 minutes). Show a short, ambiguous real-world case — a current workplace AI tool works well — and vote "will this spread?" before any discussion. Teach the five attributes, then vote again. *Debrief:* Did minds change, and on what basis?

Online or asynchronous — discussion board (20–30 minutes to post, ongoing replies). Prompt: "Post one innovation you resisted and one you adopted instantly. Using the five attributes, explain the difference. Reply to one classmate with a contrasting case."

Coaching or one-to-one (20–30 minutes within a regular session). Turn the lesson on the coachee's own venture or team: walk through the five attributes for their current pitch or tool, score honestly, and agree one change to the weakest score before the next session.

Session plans

50 minutes

Time	Segment
0–5	Hook / quick poll
5–15	Mini-lecture: Rogers and the five attributes, via sliced bread
15–35	Shortened jigsaw (3 groups, 2 attributes each)
35–45	Debrief and the AI question (Q7)
45–50	Wrap and take-away challenge

90 minutes

Time	Segment
0–10	Pre-work discussion and poll
10–25	Mini-lecture
25–50	Full jigsaw, five groups
50–65	Debrief
65–80	Apply to own organisation (Q8 design task, small groups)
80–90	Share-out and wrap

Half-day workshop (about 3–3.5 hours with breaks)

Block	Content
1 (60 min)	Story, five attributes, jigsaw
2 (45 min)	Contrast cases: Los Molinas, scurvy; why evidence isn't enough
Break	
3 (60 min)	Own-organisation adoption plan, drafted in small groups
4 (45 min)	Share-outs, peer feedback, AI adoption discussion (Q7)
Close (20 min)	Personal reflection and commitments

Assessment ideas

Formative check : "Name one attribute, in your own words, and one innovation from your own life — not the episode — that illustrates it."

Short written assignment (750–1,000 words): the adoption plan from Challenge 2 above, submitted with the five-attribute scoring shown explicitly.

Marking rubric

Criterion	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Use of framework	Names attributes, no application	Applies all five with reasoning	Applies all five and identifies the tension between them
Evidence and specificity	Generic claims	Concrete example throughout	Concrete example plus a named trust or "channel" mechanism
Design of the intervention	Vague	One clear, actionable change	Change tied explicitly to the weakest scored attribute, and testable

Adapting it

- **School (upper secondary):** drop the AI/PwC material; use the sliced-bread story alone with the five attributes as a simple framework.
- **Undergraduate:** the full question ladder works as a single seminar session with the jigsaw.
- **MBA or executive:** lean into the AI parallel (Q7, Q9) and the "technology is the easy part" lesson; use the half-day format with the adoption plan as the core deliverable.
- **In-company or practitioner groups:** skip the history, open directly with the five attributes and the "neighbour's corn" point, then move straight to their own current rollout, scaled up from the coaching activity.

Handouts

Handout 1: case summary and timeline

Date	Event	
c. 1912	Rohwedder, a jeweller, conceives a bread-slicing machine	
1917	Factory fire destroys his blueprints	
1928	Working machine built; Frank Bench agrees to try it in Chillicothe	
6–7 July 1928	Newspaper ad runs; first loaves of Kleen Maid Sliced Bread sold	
Within 2 weeks	Bakery sales rise 2,000%	
c. late 1928	First machine breaks down after about six months	
1930	Gustav Papendick's cardboard tray solves the wrapping problem;	

Date	Event	
	Wonder Bread goes national	
1933	Sliced bread outsells unsliced nationally	
Jan–Mar 1943	Wartime ban, public backlash, reversal after seven weeks	

Handout 2: question sheet

Define, in your own words: relative advantage; compatibility; complexity; trialability; observability.

Choose one innovation from your own life or work. Score it 1–5 against each attribute, with one sentence of evidence for each score. Which score is weakest, and what single change would raise it?

Further reading

- Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th edn (New York: Free Press, 2003). ISBN 978-0-7432-2209-9.
- Bryce Ryan and Neal C. Gross, "The Diffusion of Hybrid Seed Corn in Two Iowa Communities," *Rural Sociology* 8(1) (1943): 15–24. Listing.
- James Fleck, *Innofusion or Diffusation? The Nature of Technological Development in Robotics*, PICT Policy Research Paper No. 9 (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1988) — the source of "innofusion."
- Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). ISBN 978-0-19-509269-1.
- Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966; reissued 2009). ISBN 978-0-226-67297-7. Free to read at the Internet Archive.
- Paul A. David, "The Dynamo and the Computer: An Historical Perspective on the Modern Productivity Paradox," *American Economic Review* 80(2) (1990): 355–361. Free PDF.
- Geoffrey A. Moore, *Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling High-Tech Products to Mainstream Customers* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1991).