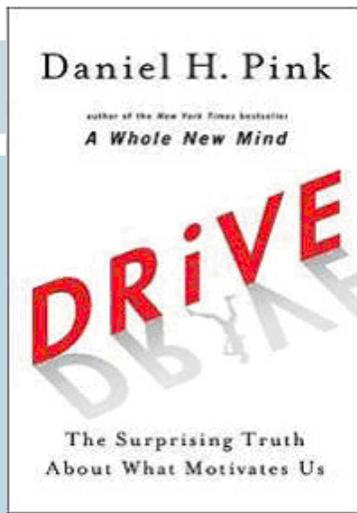


# Engaging Thought Leaders

by James Cowper and Jodie Nardone

## An Interview with Daniel Pink

**You can follow Daniel, James and Jodie on Twitter @DanielPink, @cowpernicus and @iteachELL**

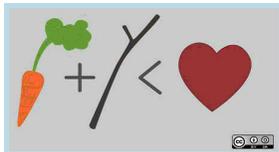


On one of our snowed in nights this past winter, we had the opportunity to speak with Daniel Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Surprisingly, he was snowed in at his location in Washington D.C. as well. For over 45 minutes Daniel talked with us about motivation and engagement in the educational setting. His insights into the system of education and the connections to his research for *Drive* are timely and certainly transferable.

The text below is a record of that conversation presented here with Daniel's permission. The conversation has been edited for presentation purposes. Thanks to Daniel Pink for his interest in sharing his thoughts, ideas, and perspectives with educators.

**James Cowper:**

Variations of the carrot and stick can be seen in classrooms all over the world and certainly in North America. How can we *unlearn* these practices (to be kind of flippant about it – the handing out of candy and detentions) so that kids can be motivated to *learn* more?



**Daniel Pink:** Unlearning things (especially for adults) is far more difficult than learning things so it's a very tall order. We've essentially created a set of assumptions that the way people (whether they are big people or little people) perform better is if you offer a reward or threaten them with a punishment. What's disconcerting is that this is true *some* of the time. The danger with our kids is that if we treat them in a way that suggests that the *only* reason to do something is to get a good grade or to avoid a punishment, we essentially sacrifice an enormous amount of talent and capability.

I think about my own formal education, particularly in elementary and secondary. It was all about the rewards. It was less about the learning because people believed that if you got the rewards, that if you hit the numbers, that if you got the results, then you were learning. Any good educator knows that just isn't the case. When learning is open-ended and collaborative and when it's about the strategies rather than the right answer then the approach is valuable in terms of helping kids think.

Do you give kids feedback for their strategies, feedback for what kind of progress they are making, and feedback for what they understand or do you just give them a reward for doing the work and/or getting the answer you want?

Any educator will tell you these two things. First, that the first approach is far more interesting. That is why they got into teaching in the first place. The second thing they'll tell you is that the other approach; the grade-based approach is easier.



From left to right, James Cowper, Jodie Nardone and Daniel Pink.

**James Cowper: In Ontario, policies and practices for assessment, evaluation, and reporting are being based on a recently released document entitled *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario's Schools, Grades 1 to 12*. Teachers report on the development of learning skills and they are required to use letter grades to report a student's academic achievement. What are your thoughts on assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices in schools?**

**Daniel Pink:** I think you want to measure both – the kind of learning skills you are talking about but you also want some measure of performance because you need to know how kids are doing. What concerns me is when *grades* become the goal rather than *learning* as the goal. If grades are the goal then people will go for the grades and that is all they will care about. But, if the grade is viewed simply as feedback on whether you are learning or not, the learning is brought to the forefront. I don't think you necessarily have to get rid of grades but you have to put it into context.



There's a difference between a learning goal and a performance goal. Our schools, especially in the States, are focused entirely on performance goals because they think that learning goals and performance goals are the same. They are not the same. Policy makers, even parents, haven't reckoned with the fact that they are two very different things.

I'll give you the best example of this I can - an example that you can relate to in Canada. I took French in secondary school and in university for six years. Every marking period of every semester I got an A in French. I can't speak French. Why? The reason is I didn't *learn* French; what I did is I performed on tests and quizzes. But if you throw me on the streets of Quebec City, in a French-speaking part, and I get lost, I'm not going to find my way back home. If I had focused in those six years on ac-

tually trying to *learn* French maybe I would have gotten a B but I would probably be able to speak French.

We're obsessed over performance goals and we're sort of thinking that if the performance goals are right then the learning goals will follow and that's just not true. In fact, the opposite might be true. That is, if we focus on the learning goals then the performance will end up taking care of itself. When you focus entirely on the performance goals, you often have a very thin, fleeting mastery of the material. It could actually be doing kids a disservice. You want to measure learning skills and you need a measure of performance. What concerns me is less grades per se than when grades basically become the goal rather than learning as the goal. If grades are the goal then people will go for the grades and may miss out on the learning.

The other thing you really want (which is much harder for teachers) is a richer, more robust, more individualized, more customized set of feedback for the kids. Here's how you're doing on this. Here's what you can improve on. And I think that's the way to go. The problem is that's very time-consuming, very difficult on teachers. Before you get to the ideal evaluation system you have to go first to the principle of why we are evaluating things. We are evaluating things because we want to give people feedback in order so that they can learn. We are not evaluating things as the end in itself and I think that's the confusion policy makers and even parents have.

The problem is that often the assessment ends up driving everything. It basically becomes the purpose rather than feedback on the purpose and that is incredibly distorting.



## Jodie Nardone: How do we change the minds of the students who have been going for that grade all along?

**Daniel Pink:** It is really difficult because as an individual you are taking on an incredibly heroic and daunting task. You're asking, "how can I deprogram and reprogram my 25 students, and then all the students in the school, and then all the students in Ontario?" It's a very daunting task because every other message they are getting, whether from parents, from policy makers, from the design and architecture of the school's evaluation system itself, is telling something opposite. So you're going up against really ferocious headwinds. The way I look at this is you've got to start small. Try to reach one or two kids. If you can do that, that is progress – you've made a difference in one or two kids' lives. Try to reach one or two parents. Find one or two fellow educators who are with you and you have a little alliance. That's how institutions change. That's how society changes. We all want to be able to say - here we go – we're going to change it all. And it doesn't work that way. It's slow and it's one by one. What keeps teachers going is the opportunity to affect one or two kids and to have those kids be better human beings because of their presence.

## James Cowper: Michael Fullan is an Ontario educator and an international educational leader who works all over the globe to research and reform education. How can we continue to motivate each other by engaging with what Michael Fullan describes as our moral purpose?

**Daniel Pink:** Part of it is simply having a conversation about those topics. You very rarely hear (and this is not a slam against teachers or administrators) inside of a school building the phrase '*moral purpose*', or even the concept of *moral purpose*. The more people talk about it the more it can become part of the conversation and become salient in people's lives. It is also another answer to the question about how you motivate yourself, how do you motivate others? One thing that often gets lost in the conversation is that we're always telling teachers how to do it. Here's what you're supposed to teach. Here's how you are supposed to teach it. Here's when you're supposed to teach it. Here's where you are supposed to teach it. But we never ask why. Why are we doing this in the first place? The why has to do with that moral purpose and what drives a lot of educators in the profession itself – is that sense of, using Michael Fullan's phrase, *moral purpose*. We don't have enough

conversations about why. That is something that the administrators can do. Just raise that question. We've had a tough day, week, year, what ever – let's not forget about why we are here in the first place. We're here because what we do matters in the kids' lives. We're here because, in all of us who have chosen this profession rather than something else, we want to make a difference in the world.

## Jodie Nardone: How do we maximize engagement for all learners (adults and kids) in schools specifically in areas of autonomy, mastery, and purpose?

**Daniel Pink:** I think a lot of it goes to autonomy. We have a premise that is erroneous which has to do with the very nature of engagement and the difference between that and compliance. Engagement and compliance are two very different things. And in many ways the whole idea of management (as it's conducted in business and as it has then been imported into schools) is about compliance. No one is ever managed into engagement. No one is ever controlled into engagement. You engage. I engage. My kids engage. Human beings engage, not by being manager controlled, but by getting there under their own steam. That engagement depends on self-direction. When students engage, as I'm sure you have seen in the classroom, they engage when they finally find a way to get there under their own steam. If we really want engagement, we have to get rid of a lot of these very controlling mechanisms that we have. We have to give students greater autonomy – not free reign wild kind of autonomy – but dial up some greater autonomy. We have to give teachers greater autonomy. There are national differences here of course, but, there are policy makers out there saying that, in the States, the ideal education system is if you're in year three class in Detroit, Michigan and a year three class in Miami, Florida, and a year three class in Seattle, Washington, and it's math class, and it's the third day of March, those teachers should be doing the exact same thing. That's terrifying. It's not giving teachers any kind of autonomy over how to do it their way, how to do the best thing, how to customize and tailor it. It is very alarming where things have gone in the United States. The good news is that the pendulum is swinging back a little bit. The problem in education policy is that we're looking for the silver bullet, the magic elixir and it doesn't exist.

## Thank you to Daniel for his time and insight.

James Cowper is a Principal and Jodie Nardone is a teacher of English Language Learners at the Greater Essex County District School Board.