

As Printed in Wisconsin School Musician

"Carrots and Sticks" by Chris Gleason

Sir Ken Robinson, Daniel Coyle, Daniel Pink and Alfie Kohn have been teaching me all summer. No, not in person (that would be great) but through their books, TED videos and podcasts. Their insights on many educational topics such as rewards, creativity, intelligence, and motivation are inspiring and thought provoking.

In Daniel Pink's book "Drive", the author makes the case against external rewards and punishments which he refers to as "carrots and sticks". He shows how current businesses and schools still operate on what he calls "Motivation 2.0" which is based on the premise "The way to improve performance, increase productivity, and encourage excellence is to reward the good and punish the bad".(Pink 19) Four decades of research has shown that this is not what motivates people, however our schools still seem use this operation system. Gold stars, food treats, verbal praise and grades are being used as extrinsic motivators with children. Rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin; they try to coerce or manipulate children into doing what we want. As Alfie Kohn states "I call these if-then rewards. If you do this then you will get that. It only gets you one thing, temporary compliance, but at a very high cost."(Kohn) "People use rewards expecting to gain the benefit of increasing another person's motivation and behavior, but in so doing, they often incur the unintentional and hidden cost of undermining that person's intrinsic motivation toward the activity."(Pink 39)

I'm often asked "How do you get kids to practice?" When I first began teaching I did what I knew - practice charts. I found that students would lie about practice, forge parent signatures, and do the very minimum amount of time to achieve an A. As Pink states, "The problem with making an extrinsic reward the only destination that matters is that some people will choose the quickest route there, even if it means taking the low road."(Pink 51) "...many people work only to the point that triggers the reward—and no further. So if students get a prize for reading three books, many won't pick up a fourth, let alone embark on a lifetime of reading- just as executive who hit their quarterly numbers often won't boost earnings a penny more, let alone contemplate the long-term health of their company." (Pink 58) Similarly, Kohn states, "...if you say this will count for a grade and compare that to kids who were given the identical assignment with no grade attached, what tends to happen is students who are offered a grade become less interested in the task and are less likely to want to think about the topic when they have a choice later. Students trying to get a good grade tend to pick the easiest task if given a choice—not because they are lazy but because they are rational. The goal is not to understand an idea, but to get an A." (Kohn)

It was clear that requiring practice time charts would not work for me so I resorted to candy and stickers to reward kids for practice. However, I learned quickly that student's would ask "what do I get if I practice five extra minutes? As Pink states, "...shiny trophies can provide a delicious jolt of pleasure at first, but the feeling soon dissipates—and to keep it alive, the recipient requires even larger and more frequent doses." "If we watch how people's brains respond, promising them monetary reward and giving them cocaine, nicotine, or amphetamines look disturbingly similar." (Pink 53-55)

So how DO we encourage practice? I tap into the desire (and the deeply human need) to direct our own lives, to learn and create, and to do better. "The reward is the activity itself—deepening learning, ..., doing one's best—there are no shortcuts." (Pink 51) As Pink states, there are three elements to intrinsic motivation or as he refers to it "Motivation 3.0": Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose. Autonomy means to allow students to have a say in what they do, when they do it and how they do it. Mastery means becoming better at something that matters. Purpose means finding a cause greater and more enduring than themselves. I teach the students that talent is not born, but rather created (read Daniel Coyle's Book "The Talent Code" also!). I show them what Myelin looks like and how it wraps the neural circuits in the brain. I teach them that to become good at any skill they need to put time in, however they need to do what Coyle defines as "deep practice" to get the best results. My goal is to show them the science behind "talent". I want them to truly understand WHY practice is important. We look at examples of professionals in many skill areas and how they strive for mastery and what keeps them going. We learn "HOW" to practice by going over the concept of "deep practice". Students help to create their own goals/assignments and reflect on progress each week. Students are also asked to reflect on how their own progress benefits the entire ensemble.

Admittedly, the concept of practice time and motivation is only one small piece of our "education puzzle". Pink, Coyle, Robinson, and Kohn cover many more topics and I encourage you to join me in "their classroom". At the very least I would urge you to watch Sir Ken Robinson's TED videos (see links below). We can make positive changes for students by reflecting on our practice and using research to inform us.

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

http://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_bring_on_the_revolution.html

Notes:

Kohn, Alfie. Interview. Vicky and Jen: What Really Matters Podcast. 2008.

Pink, Daniel H. *Drive*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009.