

The Real Truth about Motivating Excellence

Having worked in planning educational conferences for decades and I have come to know that if a session title notes anything about “motivating” or “engaging” students, attendance is guaranteed. Educators crave ideas and insights on how to fully vest students in the educational process as active participants. While strategies and tools are useful, I would advance that what we really need to address is how to create school cultures based on deep, foundational beliefs about what motivates and engages learners. We often talk of creating “lifelong learners” and the only way this can be achieved is by creating a lifetime of motivational force. How can this be done? Certainly not by a tip, trick, or simple strategy.

Our efforts to motivate students are inextricably linked to our beliefs about what constitutes talent. Daniel Coyle, author of *The Talent Code*, advances that to help students achieve excellence we must thoughtfully explore “that space -- the gap that separates regular performance people and ‘talented’ people.” He notes that “we are told stories about that space, by parents, movies and books. We are told that [some] babies are born with gifts [of greatness] in them.” But only a few receive such gifts. Similarly, in *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell notes that “there is a story usually told about extremely successful people, a story that focuses on intelligence and ambition” but “the true story of success is very different.”

Geoff Colvin picks up the theme in *Talent is Overrated* when he notes that popular belief holds that Mozart was a musical prodigy, uniquely gifted from a young age. Was he? Tiger Woods was “destined” from birth to be great in golf. Or did he simply have many unique experiences? The reality is that their success had much more to do with hard work and hours of practice, rather than pure talent, fate, or destiny. However, we are often held back by myths and stories of “giftedness” and “greatness” that prevent us from leading our students, or even ourselves, to higher levels of achievement. Pushed on the concept of natural ability, Dan Coyle admits that raw talent is a factor in success, but he point out that it is far less of a factor than most imagine.

So, what is the truth about greatness? And how might we motivate our student to strive towards excellence? Guided by recent cognitive research, many authors have been exploring this field. Most notable are two. First, Daniel Coyle posits 3 elements of “The Talent Code” in his book of the same title. After exploring “hotbeds of talent” – schools, camps, and even entire countries around the world teaching all sorts of skills and producing an unusually high number of talented individuals -- Coyle advances that “greatness isn’t born, it’s grown” through “deep practice” (practicing skills in specific way), “ignition” (motivation), and “master coaching.” Following and expanding on Coyle’s ideas, Doug Lemov explores the concept of practice in depth and detail in his work, *Practice Perfect*, where he offers over 40 specific suggestions on making the practice that we require of learners as effective as possible.

The good news about their findings is that high levels of achievement are within the potential grasp of many more people than we may ever have believed. The bad news is that this new, more truthful story of success doesn’t mesh with the myths and stories we’ve been told for so long of “God-given talent,” and that requires some substantial reprogramming .

The essential idea to consider is that learners will only be motivated to engage in an activity when they have a realistic hope of being successful. If your belief about talent and, ultimately, much of success is that it is something cosmically doled out to a lucky few, then how motivated can you be if you feel you're one of the unlucky many? If, however, your parents, your teachers, and your entire school community commit to giving you a more truthful and beneficial view that success is much more a manifestation of specific actions and supports you taking those actions, motivation and engagement are fundamentally shifted. Truly changing our students' motivation starts with deeply held beliefs that we hold.

As noted leadership author Jim Collins observes, "greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice and discipline." True success is a matter of us coming to understand this deeply ourselves, and then learning to "walk the walk and talk the talk" for our students to believe it as well.

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