

Aug. 29, 2007

Q&A: Daniel Pink *Futurist and author* ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Daniel Pink, a nationally recognized futurist and speaker, is author of *A Whole New Mind*.

Editor: What is “ready?” What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Pink: Literacy and numeracy are essential, of course. If young people don't master those, they're sunk. But helping students become productive workers, effective citizens, and full-fledged human beings requires so much more. I think we need to get past the Thanksgiving turkey model of education where schools “cook” kids for a certain amount of time and “serve” them to colleges and employers. Today, when the shelf life of any specialized knowledge is so fleeting, we need to think of readiness as not merely a collection of specific skills but as a broader set of human assets -- self-direction, curiosity, persistence, and the willingness to take risks.

Editor: How well are schools preparing today's students for tomorrow's workplace challenges?

Pink: Not well at all, I'm afraid. When the kids who are in school today enter the labor market, they'll have to do work that's hard to outsource and hard to automate. That means they'll rely much more on what we might think of as “right-brain” abilities -- design, empathy, storytelling, synthesis, and so on. They need a foundation of left-brain abilities. But these artistic, empathic, big picture abilities are the ones that count most. Yet at the very moment the economy is putting a premium on these sorts of abilities, education policy -- certainly at a national level -- seems intent on turning kids into vending machines for correct answers. It's scary.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6 ½ hour instructional formula, a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can schools do differently?

Pink: That formula amounts to about 15,000 hours for each child. But the real question is what happens during those hours rather than how many hours a child logs. If we spend more time doing wrong -- or more likely, irrelevant -- things, it won't matter a bit.

Editor: What can and should be done to ensure that programs teaching “readiness” skills are replicable across districts, states, and the nation?

Pink: That's a hugely important question. There's plenty of excellence and innovation out there. The problem is scalability. There's no magic formula, no instant solution. But the broad answer might be counterintuitive: greater autonomy at every level -- from the district to the classroom. If we can spread knowledge about best practices, and then liberate educators to put them in place the way they see fit, the most effective measures can eventually scale.