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What Makes a “Good” Teacher “Great”?

The fall semester brought me yet another class of graduate students just embarking on their gifted education courses. Unlike many students I’ve had in the past, the majority of the class had no background at all in gifted education—no undergraduate courses, no graduate courses, not even any staff development. While this was challenging, it was also instructive because their questions let me know where most teachers really are when it comes to teaching gifted students. One concern voiced over and over during the semester was “What makes a ‘good’ teacher a really ‘great’ teacher for gifted and talented students?”

Of course, the literature is full of lists of traits of effective teachers of the gifted. In fact, our textbook had several long and very comprehensive lists—so long and so detailed that one of the students ventured to say that a teacher who measured up would be at the least a magician and, at most, a genuine miracle-worker! These lists and the student’s frustrations forced me to think about this issue. So, “What makes a teacher of the gifted great?”

I found some answers in a study by Ken Bain and his associates at the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence at Northwestern University, reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Bain, 2004). The scholars at the Searle Center studied more than 60 effective college professors—the kind of teachers students rave about. In fact, an example in the article was one of my own history professors, Dr. Ralph Lynn. Governor Ann Richards called his classes “magical tours,” and *People* editor Hal Wingo said that Lynn offered an argument for human cloning

because “Nothing would give me more hope for the future than to think that Dr. Lynn, in all his wisdom and wit, will be around educating new generations from here to eternity!” Bain and the other researchers concluded that Lynn and the other great teachers shared some common strategies.

First, they created a “natural critical learning environment.” They established an atmosphere that fostered critical thinking about questions students found interesting and provocative. “Critical thinking” included making decisions, defending choices, reasoning from evidence, examining quality, and making improvements—all reinforced by ongoing feedback from the teacher. Think of this process as something like working out with a personal trainer. The trainer uses a “show and tell” approach with the client in teaching her how to perform an exercise. The trainer constantly reinforces correct form as well as criticizing “wrong moves,” showing where and how to improve. The message from the trainer is that one can improve with time and effort.

The same thing is true in the classroom. Learning does take time and effort, and there is no one teaching strategy that inspires this. Almost any strategy that “works” for an individual teacher is worth at least a try. But, the teacher must always communicate to the gifted students that mastery and growth will require effort. Unfortunately, many of our students have never been challenged. Great teachers will challenge them while simultaneously offering support and making it “okay” to try and fail and try again.

One key to engaging and challenging students is asking provocative questions and providing guidance as students struggle with answers. Think of yourself as a 21st-century Socrates. Socrates was never content with just one question; rather, he continued to ask guiding questions that would help his students discover the answers for themselves. Another important element involved with a good question (as opposed to initially giving a pat “answer”) is to surround the question with broader issues, both in the discipline and in the world. I liked very much what Donald Saari, a mathematics professor at the University of California–Irvine was quoted as saying: “I want the students to feel like they have invented calculus and that only some accident of birth kept them from beating Newton to the punch.” That, I think, is what we want for our gifted students: that feeling that what they are discovering is important and meaningful. Bain and his colleagues cite many examples of authentic intellectual activity by students in classrooms, examples across the disciplines. They provide spaces, Bain says, where “students encounter safe, yet challenging conditions in which they can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again without facing a summative evaluation.” It occurs to me that this is the description of the kind classroom gifted students need.

What else did they find? They learned that it is important to grab students’ attention and keep it focused. They also found that effective professors begin where the students are, not where the discipline

prescribes they should be. Think again about the personal trainer. He or she discovers at the beginning of each session where the client is and plans the session accordingly. In addition, the trainer has a goal, achievement toward which the client should be moving. Great teachers do this, as well: They plan instruction based on clear goals. And, like personal trainers, they also know that those goals change. In relation to gifted students, I think knowing stu-

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dents also means keeping in the front of the teacher’s mind the “who” and “what” of giftedness.

Another key to effectiveness is high expectations, not only of the students, but also for the teacher himself or herself. Teachers of gifted students certainly must ask as much of themselves as they do of their students, for if we expect commitment from them, we must own it ourselves.

Another idea from Bain’s research includes the willingness to help students outside of class. Several of my students this fall needed lots of “how-

to” guidance as they experienced not only a new discipline (gifted and talented education), but also graduate study itself. Gifted students tend to push classroom teachers to better explanations, more guidance, and more detail. They have a strong need to know. Many, as well, have a strong need to get it right.

Further, the best teachers engage students in disciplinary thinking. In the gifted field, we have often modeled instruction according to the standards of Bruner and others who suggested that we need to involve students in the structure of the disciplines, to guide them to think like mathematicians or historians or writers. Disciplinary thinking may also mean relating the discipline to current news—what’s happening in the here and now.

Finally, the research suggested that the great teachers provide diverse learning experiences. Gifted students demand novelty; they have a great appetite for different ways of thinking and learning. Again, think of the trainer who alternates exercises and moves on to something new when his client gets bored or frustrated, finding something that will inject fun and excitement into the workout.

How did I answer my novice gifted educators when they asked about the difference in the “good” teacher and the “great” teacher? I shared some of these ideas and others as they traveled the challenging road to greatness. [@GCT](#)

Reference

Bain, K. (2004, April 9). What makes great teachers great? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, B7.