

In the Classroom

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Images of Teaching

Who should teach the gifted? Reading the “laundry lists” of teacher characteristics in textbooks on gifted education, we are humbled by all the desirable traits that are suggested. The bottom line seems to be that the gifted benefit most from being in classrooms with teachers who know and understand their learning characteristics and needs. Their most effective facilitators of learning are teachers with strong academic preparation and highly developed pedagogical skills.

With those parameters in mind, what do effective teachers actually do? That seems simple enough: *teach!* But, how we teach is a highly personal, individualistic activity, one that changes from day to day, from class to class, and even from minute to minute. What we do in each teaching encounter varies as we consider our content, the physical and emotional setting of the experience, and the students entrusted to us. Fortunately, there isn't a paper doll model of the “effective teacher of the gifted” any more than there is any one teacher who is perfect for all students all the time. What we do know, however, is that some teachers are able more often than not to provoke positive responses from their students despite different approaches to the teaching/learning interaction.

Teaching styles can be categorized in many ways. I am indebted to Kelvin L. Seifert (1999) for many of the ideas that follow. Seifert proposed just three possible ways teachers might be characterized: as *instructional managers*, *caring persons*, or *generous experts*. The *instructional manager* is one who is able “to focus on orchestrating sets of activities for groups and individuals” (Seifert, p. 137) and is able to com-

municate a clear organization to the students. For strong managers, the focus is more on the “how” of teaching, or actually on what individual, small-group, or whole-class activities he or she plans—and when and for whom he or she planned them. Of course, no teacher is *completely* focused on management, even though he or she may spend a great deal of planning time thinking about how the classroom will work on any given day or specific class period. But, an important concern is always the many and complex ways that learners interact with learning activities.

Instructional managers carefully coordinate timing and sequencing; they are constantly assessing and reassessing student progress. While they know something about their students' lives outside of school, they separate outside life from school life. What really matters is students' performance inside the classroom. This isn't necessarily “cold” or distant. In fact, a businesslike attitude toward the business of learning that makes school an ordered place can promote a sense of safety that students may not have outside of the classroom walls. But, it must be acknowledged that this kind of classroom can feel

impersonal and uncaring to some students. Teachers whose dominant style is that of instructional manager must be especially sensitive to the diversity of her students. They should acknowledge the variety of student reactions to them—then go beyond acknowledging diversity to redirecting student learning and appreciating students' learning styles.

A second image of the teacher is that of a *caring person*. These teachers' starting point is the diversity of their students. Their focus is on Matt the musician, Marti the mathematician, Michael the writer. Their antennae are out to the new kid who has just moved into a foster home, the two students whose parents have just divorced, the boy whose dad has just been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. They constantly keep in mind that this heterogeneous group has not only gifted students, but also two students in content mastery and three ESOL students. For them, the line between students as learners and students as people is more blurred. It's not that they ignore the curriculum—in these days of accountability and standards, who would dare?—but they are more deeply concerned about how the work of the classroom contributes to the students' growth as individuals, valued by themselves and their communities.

It's obvious that a teacher who operates only in this realm is going to have problems. For example, in today's large classes, how can a teacher actually relate to even 20, much less 150, students as individuals? And there are practical concerns. Even though Matt may be a musician and not a mathematician, he is still going to be tested on math. And what if a student doesn't really want the teacher to know him or her as a person and may even see a personal relationship as an invasion of privacy? Teachers whose style is primarily that of a caring person face

many dilemmas as they look at their students and make decisions about what and how they will teach.

Still another image of a teacher is one of the *generous expert*. In this role, teachers certainly care about their students—but, caring can never obscure the fact that the classroom is all about learning. Generous experts acknowledge that there is a gap between what they know and what their students know. They see their task essentially as one of narrowing that gap. Their relationships with their students are more of mentor and protégé or expert and novice. All their students are equally important as individuals, all valued, all deserving of respect. But, they are unequal in other ways: in knowledge and social skills, for example. The teachers' task is to narrow the gaps between their own expert performance in reading or mathematics, for example, and those of their students, who are often spread out along a broad spectrum of knowledge and skill. In order to do this, they share their expertise freely and enthusiastically, challenging and inspiring, guiding and prodding, thinking "out loud" and reflecting on their own learning, all for the benefit of the students.

This role is not as easy as it sounds. No one can be an "expert" in everything, and perhaps the teacher may have to cope with unexpected intellectual demands. This may be particularly true for teachers of gifted students, whose students can and often do know more about any given topic than they do. Furthermore, even when the teacher is an expert, there may be students who don't respect his or her expertise. "Like relationships based on managing and on nurturing students, . . . relationships based on expert-novice differences cannot work for all possible situations or all purposes" (Seifert, 1999, p. 154), nor can

any one of the roles alone be a good fit for a teacher of the gifted.

Yet, each and all of these images of a teacher fit with the notion of constructivism—the approach to teaching that focuses on students' creating or "constructing" their own learning. In constructivism, learners move beyond merely absorbing and memorizing facts and learning skills passively. Rather, they build their own structure of ideas and concepts and elaborate on their intellectual structures through their own active efforts. *Instructional managers* foster active learning by carefully planning a classroom where students can take a variety of paths toward mastery of the curriculum. They "[strive] for a classroom in which students can learn without conflicts, confusion, or distractions" (Seifert, 1999, p.155). *Caring persons* also foster active learning; in this role, they purposefully choose to recognize the individuality of each student and support a wide range of choices in how and when and what to learn. *Generous experts* are also constructivists. They share more than their knowledge; they also share the "how" of expertise. In gifted education, we are often urged to share how the experts in various fields approach problems and how they solve them—"Think like a paleontologist" or "Approach this project like an engineer."

Which of these roles—or none of them, or a combination of them—should be the "ideal" for the teacher of the gifted? Do all three exist in our teaching lives? Here's what my experience tells me: First, organization and careful planning is very important. But, I am more than an outside observer or foreman on a job, directing the workers to specific tasks. Yet, most of my students (of all ages) seem to respond to a sense of order, to choices in ways of learning. Whether in kindergarten or the graduate classroom, I need a plan

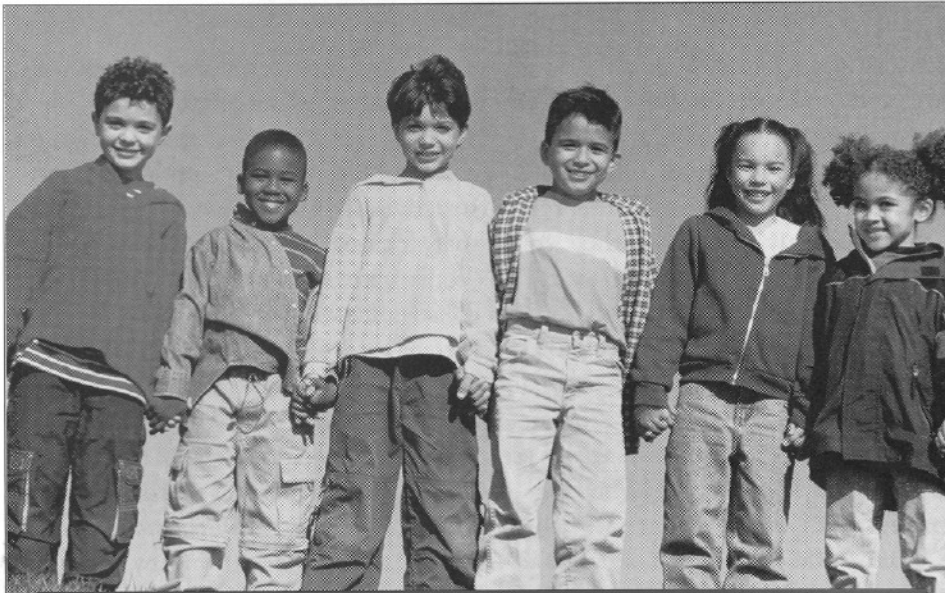
with a variety of alternatives and options for students with differing learning styles. In order to make this kind of thoughtful organization possible, I must know and care for my students—who they are now, who they have been, and who they aspire to become. But, caring alone is not enough.

For me, the clearest image of the effective teacher is that of the generous expert, for it seems to allow for both caring and organization. In this role, I am not merely an expert; I am an organized, caring individual. Yes, I “know” literature or gifted education or some other subject with more depth than my students, and I have a wealth of information to share. Perhaps more importantly, I can model how a writer writes or a researcher studies. I like being actively involved in my students’ intellectual lives, noticing how they think and also being aware of how I model my own thinking.

Who should teach the gifted? How should we do it? That “thing” called teaching is any activity that encourages learning, and that “thing” can be in many images. What is your personal metaphor as a teacher? It may be one of those suggested by Seifert, or it may be another—a symphony conductor, an editor, an artist carefully adding details to a mural. Or, it could be one of a coach or a parent or a guide. Whatever metaphor you choose, you will probably find it insufficient for every class and certainly for every student. It will likely change over time. But, the search is what keeps teaching challenging, dynamic, and, most of all, one of life’s most worthwhile activities. **GCT**

Reference

Seifert, K. L. (1999). *Constructing a psychology of teaching and learning*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin.



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