

Compartmentalization: Good for Want Ads, Not for Education

Christy Folsom

An ad frequently runs in the New York Times showing a woman in her bathrobe, a satisfied smile on her face, a steaming cup in one hand, while the other hand straightens the pages of a newspaper. The caption reads: Sunday and the New York Times. The sigh is almost audible. While I rarely meet the advertising world's image of a Sunday Times reader, I do at least dig into the section that announces the week's educational opportunities as described in the Education section. As my doctoral work draws to a close, I am spending more and more time searching the Sunday Times for a position in which I can work with those preparing for a career in teaching. In the process, I have learned that the compartmentalization that serves to organize want ads with efficiency can be detrimental in the education of teachers. The valuable knowledge and skills found in the specialty fields of education, such as gifted, can help prepare all teachers.

The Search

Using colored pens I mark the possible positions—director of school, professor in a teacher preparation program, district curriculum specialist—that *I* could consider, or for which I might *be* considered. I carefully cut out the tiny description and Scotch tape it onto one side of a file folder. In large black letters I write the date that the letter of interest and resume is due. To make future inquiries easier, I also write in large letters the telephone number where I am able to obtain more information. The filing folder becomes the repository for a copy of my letter of interest, any information I receive concerning the position, notes I take over the telephone, or email messages.

Letter of Interest

In December I submitted a letter of interest, resume, and a list of references to a small college in Manhattan that advertised for a “generalist” in their teacher preparation program. Soon a letter arrived from the head of the education department notifying me that my letter had been received and I would hear more from them in February. I called in February. They were still poring through the applications, but I was on the list of first cuts. I would hear in a few weeks. I did not hear.

Since I was leaving for Oregon, I called again to ask about my status. I did not want to be gone when they began interviewing. As before, the department head quickly found my file—a very good sign. This time, however, she explained to me that I had not made the second cut. The faculty had decided not to invite me for an interview, after all, since so much of my resume` was filled with gifted education experiences. “We do not have a gifted education program,” she explained. “The faculty felt that perhaps you would not be suitable for a regular education position.”

Essential Assertiveness

My newly acquired New York assertiveness rose to the occasion. “I disagree,” I calmly stated. “It is my background and experience in gifted education that qualifies me to be an excellent teacher of teachers preparing for regular education classrooms. I think you should see me.” My passion increased as I talked to her about teaching and learning, about the teaching of thinking, about hands-on and minds-on teaching. As I heard my voice rising in steady crescendo, I apologized for my enthusiasm. “You probably think I am making this up, but I’m not. I really feel this way.” There was a faculty meeting in an hour and she would tell them about our conversation and get back to me. By late afternoon I received a schedule to come to the college in three days prepared to teach a class of students, followed by an interview with the full education faculty.

The Teaching Demonstration

Being given the opportunity to teach showed me the high priority this college placed on their students’ learning. I prepared for the teaching demonstration by drawing from the theoretical foundation I designed for my dissertation (Teaching for Intellectual and Emotional Learning, TIEL), a project from a fourth grader whom I tutor in thinking processes and managing projects, and Julie Taymor’s Broadway production of the Lion King.

On the appointed day I faced 30 students on the day before spring vacation. They were exhausted from midterms, and, for all practical purposes, brain dead. I placed the Lion King score in the CD player and asked them to look at three transparencies. Taken from Taymor’s book, the transparencies explained the major divisions of the development process that transformed an animated film into a Broadway musical. Mustering their last shreds of attention, the students watched the titles on the transparencies: Conceptualization, Development, and Performance.

“What do these three words describing Taymor’s theatre work have to do with teaching?” I asked.

There were a few scattered brief comments. Then, from the farthest corner in the back of the room, a student named Jerry raised his hand, “The teacher has to come up with the concept for a lesson, then develop it to teach to the students, and then the students perform what the teacher has planned.”

It was a heaven-sent response. From that description of the teacher’s fundamental planning task, I could help them understand how that is only the beginning. The student must also experience the conceptualization and development aspects of learning. In order for this to happen, the teacher must *consciously* plan learning experiences in which the students will *consciously* make decisions, plan, and evaluate work based on their own ideas.

For an example, I showed the students a two-sided, upside-down, fact-fiction book that Joey, my tutoring student, had made for a school project. One side of the book included factual research about Genghis Khan, whose penetrating eyes foretold from his youth that he would be a great warrior. On the other side was Joey’s illustrated fiction story. Joey wrote about the imaginary adventures of Genghis Khan as he slipped through the center of the earth, leaped a time warp, and conquered territory across America. I showed them how I had taught Joey, in the dark after school hours of December, how to make decisions about his project, how to plan the research and then the story, and how to evaluate his work at the end.

I asked the students *why*. *Why* should students be aware of the development processes involved in their projects? *Why* would Joey's parents pay me a substantial amount of money each week to sit in a noisy hallway teaching Joey about thinking and how to organize his projects? The other students in Joey's class certainly hadn't been made aware of the thought processes involved in their work. Isn't it enough that the teacher developed the project idea for the students to do? *Why* should a teacher go through all the work of explicitly teaching their students how to make decisions, plan, or self-evaluate their work? On any given school day, student projects turn out fine without all that exhausting effort. Indeed, many school hallways and bulletin boards testify to the high level of production going on in classrooms.

The teachers-to-be grew more thoughtful as they pondered my questions and then began to respond, "The students would be more involved in their work." "The students would be motivated." "They would learn things that would help them with future projects and decisions." And, perhaps the most insightful, "The students would develop confidence in themselves." Vintage gifted education? Yes, and also good teaching that results in effective learning.

The Interview

Following the teaching demonstration, the faculty and I retired to a small conference room with a long table for the interview. I took a place at the end of the table so that all eight of them could see me as they asked questions. In the course of the questioning I learned a great deal about the goals of their faculty and their effort to build a strong and revitalized teacher education program. They valued strongly the role that caring, empathy, and character development play in teaching. They were proud of the high degree of mutual respect that existed between the professors and the students. This respect fostered the open communication that I had observed among the professors and students, and further supported the learning process. The faculty valued thinking and made sure that students participated in evaluating their own work. Also, the very fact that the faculty chose to schedule me for an interview and demonstration within a three-day time frame was evidence of their flexibility and openness to possibility.

I mentally placed each of the facets of this fine program within the theoretical framework of my dissertation. Within this framework the development of character is juxtaposed with cognitive processes, illustrating how the intellectual and emotional capabilities of the brain are coordinated. During the interview this framework was useful in guiding my thinking as I gathered and evaluated information about teaching and learning. The described goals of the program included many of the intellectual and emotional components on the mental map that oriented my dissertation research.

The Gap

Yet, there was a gap between the professors' expectations and students' actions (Hollingsworth, S., 1989; Goodlad 1990; French & Rhoder 1992). The students had difficulty sharing their observations, making connections, and expressing their thinking. One of the professors later told me that the students had difficulty critically questioning and formulating questions. This situation was by no means unique with this group of students and teachers. By high school and even more so by college, students have learned that opportunities for open creative thinking, expressing opinions, or making connections between disparate pieces of information are infrequent and often not valued. Then, when these kinds of intellectual processes *are* expected, it is a difficult task to dig out from the hole of convergent, factual thinking that often results from the journey through school.

Filling the Gap

What did I do differently that was designed to fill the gap between professor and student; teacher and learner? It is very simple, really, and included three teaching decisions.

First, I visually, verbally, and actively linked theory to practice. I showed the students the theoretical framework from which I was working and asked them to identify on the framework the processes involved in the examples of both the Lion King and Joey's book.

Second, I made the processes of thinking and caring visible, while relating these processes to their personal lives. To conclude the teaching demonstration with guided practice, I asked the students to analyze their decision to attend their college. They used the same decision-making grid that Joey had used to decide what to include in his story. This simple tool, that I learned about in my early days of gifted education, helps students to analyze and make decisions. It includes a statement of the problem, list of options, criteria by which to evaluate, and a numerical grid for rating the options. I again used the dissertation framework to help the college students see how the evaluative thinking skills involved in decision-making related to their feelings of caring and commitment as they made their final college decision.

Third, I named the processes. Instead of ethereally discussing the emotional aspects of learning or addressing thinking in an undefined, general manner, I named and defined the processes involved in the three examples that I used in the teaching demonstration. Whether it was Julie Taymor's project of the Lion King, Joey's project of the Genghis Khan book, or the students' project of deciding which college to attend, the thinking processes involved were the same. Explicitly naming and demonstrating the process of decision-making increased the capacity of the students to make the connections among all three situations. Through *naming*, *seeing*, and *doing* the students could more easily make a transformation in their thinking. And, learning, after all, is comprised of transformations in how we think, ideally resulting in a change in action.

What I Learned from This Experience

It is too early to know whether I am being considered for the teaching position for which I interviewed. However, I learned a great deal about compartmentalization from the entire experience. First of all, I learned, through a very concrete example, that the gap between regular education and gifted education is deep and wide, although both are committed to effective learning for students. Second, this experience confirmed for me that we in gifted education must take a stronger initiative in constructing the bridge over that gap. Whether the gap has been formed by hostility over perceived privileges of the gifted, a lack of knowledge of the deep structures of learning and teaching, or a misunderstanding of the basic needs of gifted students, it is up to us to lay the first planks.

Role of Conceptual Foundations

What does this say to members of the Conceptual Foundations Division of NAGC? We are on the right track. The division is sponsoring a preconference session, scheduled for November in Albuquerque. A panel representing a wide variety of educational expertise will discuss ways that gifted education and regular education can be mutually supportive in ways that impact teachers, students, and teachers-to-be. Through our thematic newsletters for spring and fall 1999 (articles for fall are still needed), we are

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focusing attention on how educators of the gifted can positively influence regular education. We are making ourselves more aware of how we may contribute to decreasing the detrimental compartmentalization wherever we may find ourselves professionally. By sharing personal experiences, thoughts theoretical, and ideas filled with possibility, we are imagining new ways of strengthening the education of teachers and of students.

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