

Creative Mavericks: Beacons of Authentic Learning

Excerpt

An excerpt from *Seeing Through a Different Lens: Facilitating the Creatively Gifted Learner*.

Off Whose Task: To Focus or Not to Focus

Wherever I go in the United States these days,
I hear about something called the crisis of
discipline, how children are unmotivated, how
they resist learning. That is nonsense, of course.
Children resist teaching, as they should, but
nobody resists learning.

John Taylor Gattin, "Spirituality in Education"

Whenever I am told that a learner is "off task," I want to know more about the nature of those tasks. Are the tasks personally relevant, interesting and developmentally suited to the learner or are they "bogus" agendas, work isolated from personal meaning? In my experience, creatively gifted learners will almost always be "off task" with the latter to a greater or lesser degree. They find it extremely difficult to connect to personally irrelevant learning. Also, highly creative learners sometimes reveal what Rutter (1989) describes as diverted attention rather than what appears to be inattention. He says,

Because it is difficult to differentiate between inattention and diverted attention, it may be informative to discover whether the daydreaming child is not attending or is attending to alternative stimuli, plans, or ideas that are focused. (quoted on page xvi of *The Coincidence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Creativity*)

As they reveal bogus agendas through their resistance to tasks, highly creative learners also reveal authentic learning through their passionate connection to tasks of personal resonance. E. Paul Torrance (1970), in his book, *Encouraging Creativity in the Classroom*, says,

(A)...common creative need and one that many people have difficulty understanding is the need to give oneself completely to a task and to become fully absorbed in it. The creative child frequently becomes so preoccupied with his ideas and problems that he is inattentive to whatever is going on around him. Such individuals are frequently absentminded. (p. 19)

Highly creative learners *demand* authenticity in their learning, often displaying the distracted behavior of AD(H)D or learning disabilities when confronted with regimented, prescriptive teaching.

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Timothy, was a seventh grader in a tiny outer island school when he taught me how extreme variations of attentionality can be. Timothy, who was diagnosed with multiple learning disabilities in conjunction with strong emotional issues, was more often than not "off task" except for artwork and construction projects which interested him. His teacher, MaryAnn (see "Meeting the Standards Through Inspiration and Fun" in Section 3) and I racked our brains to find books that would interest him and encourage his risk-taking in reading. However, he made slow and irregular progress and was "gifted" at distracting himself with any object at hand.

Finally MaryAnn found the magic book for him, Hatchet, by Gary Paulson. Timothy had grown up on a small, fairly isolated island off the coast of Maine and was attuned to the natural world. He had "smart" hands, as well, and loved creating constructions of all sorts. Brian's (the main character in Hatchet) attempts to survive in the Canadian wilderness were intriguing to him. On one of my weekly visits we were reading Hatchet together when an adult friend of his stopped in to talk with his teacher after fixing the tire on her truck. Sitting in close proximity to our table, the friend began discussing with Timothy's brother the prospect of building a boat together that summer. I thought, "Oh no, this reading session is doomed," but I was greatly surprised to witness Timothy paying focused attention to both the friend discussing the boat project *and* to his reading!

Understanding the intense need of creatively gifted learners for riveting agendas can help a teacher move beyond the apparent but misleading distracted student behaviors. With faith in the learner's ability to connect when truly inspired, a teacher can support not just steady progress, but often leaps in learning prowess. A creatively gifted learner resisting any kind of risk-taking within an inch of his life may all of a sudden beg for huge challenges and soar. Christina (my case study at the beginning of this chapter) has been one of my best teachers of unexpected progress. For example, word study was an aspect of learning that was difficult for Christina and one she put minimum effort into. While creating spelling games together engendered fun, Christina showed little interest in spelling features and patterns. In sixth grade, she moved into the older group (her small school of thirteen students is divided into two groups), and asked me, for the first time, for hard words. Identifying with the "olders," she seemed to want to "claim her seat" by tackling some challenging spelling. She studied seriously for the first time.

I pulled multisyllabic spelling words from the book we were reading, Farley Mowatt's, The Dog Who Wouldn't Be. The vocabulary in this book is very high--I had to look up some of the words--and as vocabulary study is part of her class program, Christina delighted in sharing the meaning of some challenging vocabulary with her classmates. I discovered, happily, that since many of the multisyllabic words in the book contained syllables with word patterns we had studied, I could make these "difficult" words quite achievable. We also studied the meaning origins of words, looking at the root word for clues, learning about Greek and Latin roots and discussing what language certain words originated from and how that affected the spelling.

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As Christina's confidence in spelling multisyllabic words, syllable by syllable, strengthened, her skill in structural analysis (examining the parts of a multisyllabic word) in reading soared. Farley Mowatt's The Dog Who Wouldn't Be, became a proving ground for Christina in terms of reading and spelling growth--a book in many respects beyond her grade level, but so engaging in its richness of characters and delicious humor that she embraced it fully.

Another factor in highly creative learners' ability to focus is their ability to multitask. Multitasking, a fairly recent educational term, refers to doing more than one activity at a time. Multitasking can enhance sensory input and heighten focus, particularly, I believe, in those learners often seen as distractible. A majority of my learners thrive on doing tactile projects as they work on our lessons. Left-brained attention to detail is taxing to creative, intuitive learners, and they need opportunities for creative expression in handicrafts or sometimes just random tinkering to maintain their energy and focus.

I am in the process of learning more about identifying and helping learners with their arousal levels which can be too high or too low for balanced engagement. A favorite activity of my students is natural bees wax which comes in lovely assorted colors (I have also recently used Sculpey which is less expensive and more readily available). Bees wax requires sturdy manipulation to soften it for sculpting--a great example of the kind of "heavy work" recommended for either raising or lowering a learner's arousal level. Bees wax works well for both creative projects (my learners at Christina's school created a whole container of little foods which we use for playing pieces in our games) and just plain noodling time.

Many learners need large motor outlets as well. Gretchen, a high energy, creatively gifted learner identified as learning disabled in spelling, loved learning through games. I was greatly amused one day when she added onto some of the game spaces: do a dance, sing a song, jump. What a creative way to accommodate her needs as a "motor" learner!

In the best of all possible worlds, all students would be able to acquire the learning skills they need to be self-extending, independent learners through experiences which totally matched their developmental level and personal interests. Creatively gifted students, especially, need these experiences to thrive and soar. Realistically, however, even in strongly holistic classrooms, optimal learning situations cannot be created 100% of the time. Over the years, I have learned some strategies to help my learners through the less than optimal times, and I have encouraged them to build their own energy reservoir to draw from.

I call one of my reservoir strategies, *Garfield* relief. After a less preferred activity with my special education students, such as practicing their spelling list, we read a few pages from a *Garfield* book; they remind me if I forget. Creative humor energizes them (and, of course, my students are also getting some fine extra practice with reading!).

My ultimate goal for my creatively gifted learners is for them to recognize and value their learning needs. My son Matt demonstrated this achievement when he shared his

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discouragement over his schedule the fall term of his sophomore year at college. He had chosen five courses that he thought were going to be personally interesting and creative. It turned out that none of the five inspired him, and he could feel his energy plummeting.

However, Matt realized exactly why this was so, and knew that he could slog on through successfully with the anticipation of a better selection next term (the light at the end of the tunnel). I have often counseled high school creatively gifted learners to be sure to include at least a couple of courses in their schedule that allow for creative expression, filling up their reservoir to be drawn upon for more taxing work.