PROMOTING INDEPENDENCE IN LEARNING OF GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

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OF

GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

Although this project refers to theory and literature about giftedness and independent learning, it is based primarily on narratives of classroom experience. The key belief is that the best way to build on the strengths and meet the needs of adolescent gifted learners is for the teachers involved to create a classroom learning climate and curriculum which coaches those students towards independent learning. Such a climate and curriculum provide opportunities for gifted adolescents to reach their potential.

An adaptable and practical three-stage model for designing such a curriculum is provided. By integrating self- and teacher assessment and evaluation throughout three stages of curriculum, the model provides opportunities for students to develop the skills necessary for independent learning.

Three narratives of my own experiences in using the three-stage model outlined above are provided. The three situations include the role of classroom teacher of OAC English, co-author of a literature anthology and teacher resource for grade nine destreamed English classes, and facilitator of an Interdisciplinary Autonomous Learner programme for gifted/highly able adolescent learners. Thus, the three-stage curriculum model has been used and shown to be effective.

My own, and my students' experiences in using the model, and the common ground discovered in all three roles, form the basis of the recommendations being made in the final chapter. Practical recommendations are made to teachers who are interested in implementing a curriculum which promotes independent learning for gifted adolescents.

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CHAPTER ONE: KEY BELIEFS

OVERVIEW

Many people complain that secondary school students and graduates are not prepared for the demands either of further education or the work world. As well, many educators complain that students are too dependent on being "spoon-fed" a certain amount of a curriculum which is "covered". Students often express their own frustration that they are not offered a curriculum which is relevant to their strengths and needs. At times, they feel that they have no stake in their own education because curriculum decisions and evaluation criteria are completely controlled by teachers.

In particular, many gifted students feel frustrated by curricula which are too teacher-centered and too teacher-controlled. Rather than encouraging independent thinking, action, and autonomy, such curricula often promote conformity. Students of high intelligence drop out because schools have not challenged them to develop and channel their talents. As Kenneth and Rita Dunn write:

> Skills, understandings, and attitudes are blunted
> both by academic and vocational programmes that have
> little or no relevance to the excitement, stimulation
> and normal motivation of an active and changing
> world. The greater crime, however, is the neglected
> development of the personal values and problem-
> solving skills, love of learning, and each student's
> ability to seek and acquire knowledge independently.[1]

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[1] K. Dunn and R. Dunn, <u>Practical Approaches to Individualizing Instruction</u> (1972) p. 221

For gifted learners, in whom the central processing functions of memory, association, reasoning, extrapolation and evaluation are already enhanced, it is most important to offer curricula which foster independent thinking and learning.[2] That group of young people will likely produce the leaders and moulders of the next generation; they must be capable of thinking and problem-solving independently and critically. Even in Ancient Greece, Plato recommended that children of superior intellect be selected at an early age and offered a specialized form of instruction in science, philosophy, and metaphysics. The use of the word "offered" is deliberate. For gifted adolescents, the best curriculum is not one that "covers" content. Instead, it is a curriculum which "offers" opportunities to think, grapple with problems, debate and discuss ideas, and develop fully their potential to think and to act as responsible individuals. In chapter two, these ideas are developed.

Chapter two focusses on the characteristics of giftedness, discusses programme and placement possibilities, and recommends a framework for designing the most effective and appropriate curriculum. Once it has been determined through assessment (by use of various tests and observations) that a student meets the established criteria for giftedness, the local Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) is struck.

The IPRC (composed of a principal or board supervisor, special education teacher, and other teachers,) recommends the most appropriate and effective placement and programme and reviews that decision on an annual basis. The underlying belief of this project is that the most appropriate and effective placement and programme for gifted adolescents is one which fosters independence in learning. The project describes a way of conceiving, developing, and practising such a curriculum, using a three-stage model which integrates assessment and evaluation with teaching and learning.

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[2] Samuel Kirk and James Gallagher, Educating Exceptional Children(1979) p. 59

The curriculum model suggested in chapter three has been used and shown to be effective in promoting increased autonomy in the learning of gifted adolescent learners. Three examples of my own experiences with gifted adolescents are shared: as a classroom teacher of OAC English, as a co-author of a grade nine destreamed English programme, and as a facilitator of an Autonomous Learning course for gifted/highly able adolescents.

The use of the three narratives is effective in the sense that it allows me to share not only what has been done in curricula which foster independent learning, but also what was experienced by my students and myself. In his introduction to Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin's book, Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience(1990), Elliot Eisner writes:

> The metaphors by which teachers live, the
> way they construe their work, and the
> stories they recount, tell us more profoundly
> about what is going on in their lives as professionals
> than any measured behaviour is likely to reveal.
> But to use such data, one must have courage.
> Narratives are regarded as "soft", and soft
> data do not inspire confidence among
> the tough-minded...One must be willing to
> understand by participating sympathetically
> in the stories and in the lives of those who
> tell them. One must be willing to vicariously
> participate in scenes that one cannot enter into
> directly. One needs to be able to trust on the
> basis of coherence, utility, and the often
> ineffable sense of rightness that true stories display.[3]

In addition to the narratives of personal experience found in chapter three, practical suggestions for varied teaching, learning, and assessment strategies are given. In the final chapter, concrete recommendations are provided for implementing a curriculum which leads gifted learners to become increasingly more independent, autonomous and self-directed.

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[3] Elliot W. Eisner, foreword to Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, Teachers as Curriculum Planners(1990) p.xx

INDEPENDENT LEARNING

Rita and Kenneth Dunn, in their book Practical Approaches to Individualizing Instruction provide insight into Independent Learning. They describe **Programmed Learning** as a first step towards independent learning. In such learning, students are pre-diagnosed, then programmed into a sequence at an appropriate point of entry. From there on, they follow the same curriculum sequence as all others, but do so at their own pace. [4]

Individualized Instruction goes one step further. Learning activities and goals are designed by the teacher who knows the student and has tested his or her "abilities, weaknesses, learning style, interests and degree of self-discipline".[5] After that diagnosis, the teacher prescribes a programme tailored to the child's needs. Flexibility, a wide range of resources, and some choices are offered.

In their book, Dunn and Dunn go on to define the third stage: **Independent Learning**. Here, the teacher not only individualizes the pace and resources, but also the topics or content. Each individual is encouraged to establish a learning contract for a topic of personal choice and uses the teacher as a resource consultant, facilitator, and guide.

The work of the Dunns, particularly in the field of learning styles, has been very influential and is respected. However, as programming for learners who have been identified as gifted, their definition of independent learning does not go far enough. Truly independent learning, as defined in this project, goes the next step. It coaches the learner through a series of opportunities to develop thinking, reasoning, and evaluating skills. First, there is a stage of self-assessment of one's own strengths and needs. (Assessing Learning Background) Then, the student selects from a wide range of learning opportunities in which growth and progress can be

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[4] Rita and Ken Dunn, Practical Approaches to Individualizing Instruction, p.45
[5] Ibid., p.45

assessed. (Working Towards Growth and Achievement) Independent learning encourages reflection on the process of goal-setting, progress, and achievement. In the third stage, achievements are assessed. (Summative Evaluation of Learning)

It is possible to design an Independent Learning curriculum which encourages students to assess their own strengths and needs and to take increased charge of their own learning. This would benefit many students, particularly those identified as "gifted". Students would benefit; so too would the educational system and the society it serves.

BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENT LEARNING

There are several potential benefits of encouraging gifted young people towards more self-assessment, self-direction, and independent thinking. First, when they are coached through a stimulating curriculum designed to develop individual strengths and meet their needs, students tend to become involved, interested in, and committed to their learning. As they get involved in self-assessment, seeing and recording progress, growth, and achievements, they develop increased confidence in themselves and become more committed to learning. A grade twelve gifted student, Fraser Elsdon, expressed the same idea in this way in a learning log which evaluated the effectiveness of Independent Learning:

> One thing that sticks out in my mind about our
> course together is the lack of a teacher and the
> presence of a "coach". This is one of the key ways
> of allowing the gifted to learn to their full potential.
> Removing the authority figure, and replacing it
> with a mentor or coach, encourages the student
> to feel free to learn about relevant topics in whatever
> fashion he or she deems fit. As a student, when I
> challenged myself to do research on computer crime, I
> did it to the greatest of my abilities. If more gifted
> students could experience a course like ours, there
> would be fewer under-achieving gifted.[6]

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[6]Fraser Elsdon, Learning Log Entry January 30, 1993

Thus, students who are encouraged to assess and build on their own strengths, talents, and needs, will be more likely to thirst after knowledge, to set and achieve personal goals, and to learn.

Secondly, when increased self-assessment and self-direction is the goal of the curriculum, there is less stress and pressure on the high school teacher who no longer has to feel responsible for knowing and being all to the learners. The energy of the teacher can be channelled into establishing a climate of rapport, assessing strengths and needs of the learners, and coaching and facilitating learning by designing, developing, and evaluating challenging and appropriate curriculum. A teacher should not be made to feel entirely responsible for a young person's learning. In fact, too many teachers feel that their role is to control what goes on in the classroom and to keep students entertained and interested. Their training as teachers left them feeling responsible for motivating students to learn. However, the reality is that the individual learner is the only one who can generate an intrinsic desire and motivation to learn. A teacher's time would be better spent in creating the climate and the curricula in which the individual is encouraged to accept and embrace that responsibility.

A third benefit to increased autonomy in learning may also be felt at the university level. University professors enjoy teaching learners who have already begun to develop fertile minds, who thirst after knowledge, and who are capable of independent critical thinking, evaluation, reflection and imaginative response.

Finally, young people who are encouraged to think critically, reflect wisely, and make constructive, informed decisions will likely become more productive members of society. Independent, self-directed learners who have developed the skills of "learning to learn" are more apt to become leaders than those who passively receive and try to memorize thoughts and ideas transmitted to them. The explosion of knowledge that has occurred in the last few years has rendered it impossible to keep up by trying to learn facts and

content. What is important is to teach people to learn, to use available resources and technology to access what they need to know, and to think for themselves as they evaluate situations on a daily basis.

Therefore, this project is based on the belief that school curricula which are designed to encourage more self-assessment, self-direction and autonomous learning should benefit not only gifted students, but also teachers, the educational system in general, and the society it serves.

A STUDENT'S INSIGHTS

David Patman, a gifted adolescent, and a student in the T. A. Blakelock High School Autonomous Learner course described in Chapter Three, offered these insights in response to the question "In your opinion, what has been the value of the focus on independent learning?"

> To the student, independent learning is
> a daunting task. By the time students are
> ready to tackle a project like this,
> all their experience is in doing projects
> with specific guidelines and format
> where everyone's final product will look
> basically the same. Students want to know
> exactly what the teacher wants, how much
> effort they will have to put in, and how
> high they will have to jump to please the teacher.
>
> Learning independently doesn't mean learning
> alone. Students can come to a teacher or
> other students for assistance and feedback.
> This not only stimulates leadership and
> communication skills, but also keeps the
> student who needs help from feeling centred
> out or foolish for having to ask the teacher.
> (It also gives the teacher a bit of peace!)
>
> Independent work is better for gifted students.
> It allows them to be, in effect, the authors of
> their own report cards. Once students are
> encouraged to go their own way, the ones who
> want to will produce great work. They have a sense
> of freedom, having no limit to what they can do.
> When the student picks out the topic based

on something he wants to learn, he will have
more interest. If he is also expected to choose
the type of final product that will demonstrate his
work, there is potentially much more creativity.
More of the individual student is revealed in
the final product.

Most students will do as well, or better than
they thought. A few will do as little as possible,
but a few will also excel. Their projects will far
surpass their (and your) wildest dreams. So try
independent learning. It's not for the faint-hearted,
but with interaction and discussion, you will find
that most students can cope. They will come away
with better time-management skills, better intra-
and interpersonal skills, and a sense of having
accomplished more than they would have
done on a project with strict guidelines and a
pre-determined structure. Hey, they might
even learn something![7]

POTENTIAL AUDIENCE

The focus of this particular project is on designing secondary school
curricula to meet the needs of those students who are identified gifted.
However, the narratives of experience should prove interesting to anyone
interested in promoting independence in learning.

For teachers and learners who believe that independent learning is an
achievable goal, this project will prove very beneficial because it provides a
positive model for designing their own curricula. As well, for those who may
want to implement an Independent Learning Curriculum, three examples,
along with their pitfalls, potential problems and achievements, are narrated
and practical recommendations are given.

The basis of the project in narratives of classroom experience should be
very encouraging to other teachers who are interested in trying a new
approach. They will identify with the joys and the struggles, the anticipation
of starting afresh, and the frustrations that occur. Yet, throughout these

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[7] David Patman, _Learning Log Entry_ February 2, 1994

narratives, there is a growing sense that the risks involved in changing the traditional role of teacher to that of "coach" of independent learning is worthwhile. It's rewarding, both personally and professionally, to see the differences that occur in the hearts and minds of students who take charge of their own learning. What is needed is the time to reflect and evaluate.

TIME TO REFLECT

Several years ago, I worked outside the classroom for two years. Removed from the daily stresses and pressures of being "on the front line", I found I had more time to reflect on who I was and what I was doing. Teaching provides little opportunity for reflection. We are so busy doing what needs to be done that we tend to take very little time for ourselves. For the first half of my career, time for reflection had been scarce. In fact, time to do anything I wanted to do, rather than what I had to do, was at a premium. When I took the opportunity to engage in reflection, I found myself not only anticipating the journey of self-assessment and discovery, but also relishing it.

The questions with which it seemed essential to grapple were numerous. What did I truly believe about teaching? Did I really feel that I could make a difference in the lives of young people? Could I maintain a high energy level and enthusiasm throughout the second half of my career? Some hurtful and negative experiences had led to such a profound sense of failure that I believed I had burned myself out. With the support of a counsellor, I came to realize how important it was to me to be not only a teacher, but the best teacher I could be. Yet I questioned how I would be able to continue teaching unless I could find some new ways, some new directions, and a new focus. If I could somehow get back to the roots of my early passion for teaching, then perhaps I could re-capture some of my beliefs, and move into the second half of my career with renewed vitality and energy. The counsellor challenged me to leave the classroom for a short time and to rediscover things I enjoyed doing. It actually took some time before I could remember what brought me pleasure outside teaching. Some of the happiest,

most fulfilling times of my life had been as a student. I had loved ideas, debates and insights. It was time to go back to school on the other side of the desk.

I discovered the opportunity for reflecting, re-evaluating, and rebuilding by registering at Mc Master University in the Master of Arts (Teaching) programme. The education courses focussed on curriculum design, critical thinking, and reflection on practices. These courses opened my mind to a world of ideas that I hadn't previously considered. For example, I had always assumed that a curriculum was simply a course of study, a list of topics to be covered. Through reading, research, discussion, and the processes of writing, I gradually developed a much larger view of curriculum. It had less to do with covering content, and more to do with creating a classroom climate with a range of opportunities for people to learn and grow to their potential. Thus, through the education courses, I broadened my views and awareness of curriculum.

However, it was in the other side of the programme, in the English courses, that I came closer to the necessary state of reflection I sought, and the quest for real understanding. In those courses, I had to feel again what it was like to be a student on the receiving end of a curriculum. In many ways, that experience of no longer being the teacher in charge was a powerful one. Frank Smith, in his book Insult to Intelligence: The Bureaucratic Invasion of Our Classrooms (1987) made an interesting connection between being a learner and a good teacher:

> Good teachers respond instinctively to the way in
> which children-and adults-learn, without direction
> from outside authorities...These teachers manifest
> attitudes and behaviours that learners become interested
> in manifesting themselves, and then these teachers help
> learners to manifest such attitudes and behaviours for
> themselves. The two essential characteristics of all the
> good teachers I have met are that they are interested in
> what they teach and they enjoy working with learners.
> Indeed, they are learners themselves. [8]

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[8] Frank.Smith Insult to Intelligence, p. 170

The experience set me on a path of reflection and self-assessment as I re-experienced the fears and insecurities of a learner. I went through periods of feeling inadequate, worried that my best would not be good enough. I procrastinated on essays and assignments, fearing the negative feedback associated with evaluation. Only gradually, with encouragement from other students and professors, did I develop the confidence and determination to stick to the course undertaken. There were fewer painful moments and more of deep pleasure as I realized once again the joy of learning and discovering.

My journey through the English courses was not so much to learn the content and the body of knowledge about Chaucer, Arnold, Hopkins, or eighteenth-century literature. Instead, it focussed on self-assessment: discovering who I had been as a student and teacher, and who I now was as a learner. The experiences caused me to come to grips with what I genuinely believed about teaching and learning. Only when I read Clandinin and Connelly's book Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience (1990) did I see my personal curriculum as a metaphor for curriculum and teaching. Clandinin and Connelly explain the connection in this way:

> When we say that understanding our own
> narrative is a metaphor for understanding the
> curriculum of our students, we are saying that
> if you understand what makes up the curriculum of the
> person most important to you, namely yourself, you
> will better understand the difficulties, whys, and
> wherefores of the curriculum of your students. There is
> no better way to study curriculum than to study
> ourselves[9]

The experience of being a student again led me to reflect on those touchstone experiences of my career as a student and to recall two people who had taught me, people who had made a difference in my learning, people who had made me want to teach. The first was a high school French teacher; the

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[9] Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience, (1990) p. 31.

other was a university professor of English. Both had a profound influence in shaping my thoughts and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Monsieur Bourdon was my grade nine French teacher. I had always enjoyed French, and had tried learning it independently. Before we studied French in school, I would go to the public library where I had discovered "Berlitz" self-teaching books. Struggling in front of the mirror to reproduce sounds phonetically , I played with and developed an interest in the language.

I was the ideal student. I loved the subject, but even more so, I loved my grade nine French teacher. It's not that he was handsome or cool. What attracted me to him was his warmth, his humanity, his love for his native tongue, and his joy in teaching. Hour after hour, I pored over my French text, memorizing the vocabulary, and drilling verb conjugations. I wanted to please Monsieur Bourdon. I wanted him to notice me, and to praise my efforts. His opinion counted. His kind words made my day. I would sit as close to him as possible, gazing into his eyes, or staring at the green tweed jacket he always wore. Whenever he asked a question, I would volunteer the answers. All I ever wanted to be was a teacher like Monsieur.

One hot afternoon in June, Monsieur was trying to teach a lesson on the use of "de", "de la" and "des". I can still see him standing at the board, at the front of the room, close to the windows. Everyone was hot and bored that day. The atmosphere in the class was lazy, yet he taught on, desperately tried to generate interest, but none of us bothered. We all sighed and watched him get more frustrated as he determinedly taught the lesson.

Finally, when no-one would volunteer, he turned to me, searching for some support. He directed a specific question, but I had not been paying attention, and I missed it. Frustrated, he picked up a French magazine and threw it to me, with these words: "Even you! Even you have let me down! I give up! Read this magazine instead. All of you are hopeless today!"

Shocked, and dismayed that my teacher could actually lose his temper, I fought back tears. Torn between tears of humiliation, frustration, and disappointment, I stood up and walked out of the room. At the time I didn't say a word, yet my thoughts and feelings raged turbulently. I decided in my thirteen-year old arrogance that I would never like this man again.

Later that day, I made some excuse to march past his room, my head held high. As I sauntered coolly past, neglecting to give him my customary greeting, he called me over. At first, I refused to go, but all the voices within cried out to overcome my pride.

He said, "Faye, I owe you an apology. I was frustrated with everyone and I took it out on you. I really didn't mean to throw the magazine at you. I meant to throw it to you. Can you forgive me?" No teacher had ever asked for forgiveness before. I hardly knew what to say or do. It didn't take any time at all to forgive, and then to apologize for my own selfish rudeness, and the collective rudeness and boredom of thirty grade nine students.

That conversation lasted probably thirty seconds in a dusty hall, with light streaming in on us from the courtyard outside. It was an epiphany, a moment of insight. That morning, I learned that teachers too had feet of clay. That afternoon, I learned that it was possible for teachers to be human. In fact, it was even better than being put on a pedestal. It was acceptable to make mistakes, and to treat young people with respect, decency, and humanity. At that moment, I committed myself to becoming a teacher who would treat young people as I had been treated my Monsieur Bourdon--with decency and humanity.

The lesson he taught that day, the unspoken agenda, perhaps the most important message of the curriculum, has remained. Re-thinking, re-feeling, and remembering the events of this particular narrative have made me realize how few and yet how significant are moments of self-awareness and insight. As teachers, we need to capture them. We also need to create curricula which encourage such insight and moments of epiphany for our own students.

The second "touchstone" teacher was Dr. Flora Roy whom I first met in 1966. She was head of the English Department at Waterloo Lutheran University and I was a 16-year old first year student. Because of her poise, control and command of vocabulary, quick wit, unmatched knowledge of literature and language, and the immediate respect she seemed to garner from everyone, I held her in awe. Without even trying, she directed me on the path to self-assessment, self-awareness, and learning.

As a high school student, learning and achieving had come easily, but Dr Roy made me see there was still much to learn. I realized in her presence that , as Robert Frost so aptly worded it, "But I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep." In her shadow, I initially assessed only my weaknesses and saw what was missing. She coached me to see that I also had strengths. She modelled all that she expected of us and gently held the candle along the path.

I can never recall any sense of being controlled or directed; it was a gentle coaching. Rather than lecture, Dr. Roy moved us all into a seminar room, a kind of King Arthur and Knights of the Round Table situation. There, she guided us to delve deeply within ourselves. She encouraged us to read not only with analytical minds in gear, but also with our inner eye, always searching for how a text related to our own lives and to humanity in general. She taught both the head and the heart, and seemed genuinely interested in our thoughts, observations and shared insights.

KEY BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

On reflection, I see that both of these teachers taught curricula that were far more relevant than French or English. They used their subjects as vehicles, as springboards for teaching about life itself. They took young people with strengths and needs, and created curricula which allowed time for self-assessment, opportunities for growth, and moments for evaluation, insights, and achievements. They taught the head and the heart. Both of these people influenced me to develop some of the key beliefs discussed below.

HEAD AND HEART: Teachers are involved with the whole child, not only the head. Curriculum needs are not always cognitive. For many students, the heart needs training too. Teaching is most powerful when it encourages growth in the whole child, by responding to needs and strengths in both the cognitive and affective domains of the learners. This is equally true of gifted adolescents. They may have intellectual gifts, but they encounter many of the same problems and anxieties as their peers. They benefit from a curriculum which provides opportunities to grow socially, emotionally and academically.

TIME: A curriculum must allow time for self-assessment, reflection, and moments of insight. It also requires time for observation, assessment and evaluation by the teacher. Unlike J. Alfred Prufrock, we must cherish the time we have together. We cannot measure out our lives, or those of our students, in coffee spoons. To help learners discover their genuine strengths and needs takes time, yet it is time well-spent if it creates a climate of partnership and trust.

FLEXIBILITY: A curriculum needs a model or framework that is adaptable to learners. Everyone is unique and learns differently. For some learners, it may simply be a matter of adapting pace, learning style, teaching strategies, resources, or assessment strategies. For others, the most significant needs may be social or emotional. It is critical for teachers to be in touch with the real needs and strengths of their students, and willing to adapt the curriculum to build on those strengths and meet those needs.

SELF-ASSESSMENT: The best way for teachers to know their students is to establish a climate in which self-assessment, and reflection on learning are encouraged and valued. When students' ability to assess their strengths, needs, growth and achievements is valued, students feel more committed to their learning. They see the teacher as a guide and a coach, not just as an evaluator of learning. Teachers must also be aware of their own strengths and needs. In order to nurture growth-enhancing attitudes and behaviours in others, it is important to demonstrate those attitudes and behaviours.

FREQUENT FEEDBACK: Positive feedback, providing suggestions on how to improve and making recommendations about what to try next, is highly rewarding. If the climate in the classroom is to be one in which young people are encouraged to take risks and try different things, a trust needs to be built up between the teacher-coach and the learners. As well, students should be encouraged to provide feedback to one another in a supportive and positive way. Through the use of learning logs and targetting strategies, students can see their own growth and provide themselves with some feedback on their own growth and achievements.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION: A curriculum has to provide opportunities for summative evaluation of learning. Summative evaluation allows for time to synthesize all that has been learned and achieved. Students need to look back on where they were, and evaluate their growth and achievements. Summative evaluation may take the form of examinations, tests, or research projects, but there must be time to evaluate any growth and achievements that have occurred.

A GOOD TEACHER IS A LEARNER: Teachers who take on the role of learners and see change and transformation in their own lives are exhilarated and energized. Such teachers grow with the students through the curriculum. They too inquire, discover, grow, and learn. A curriculum should make a difference in the life of the teacher as well as in the life of the student.

A TEACHER NEEDS SUBJECT EXPERTISE: It is important that teachers have a significant knowledge base in their own subject area. Many students are engaged by their respect for the skills , knowledge, and values of their teachers. With tighter budgets and staffing constraints, some teachers are expected to teach classes in which they have little or no subject expertise. When teachers are well-qualified and experienced in their specific subject, they have the confidence to give over some control to the learners and to create a climate in which young people want to develop their own competence

in the subject area. The one time when it may be an advantage not to be a subject expert is if teachers are willing to be learners. Providing they are interested, they can model how to learn the subject, and thus turn an apparent handicap into an advantage. When students see that even a teacher might have to struggle with understanding or expressing ideas, they realize that their own frustrations and setbacks are a natural part of learning.

A TEACHER NEEDS SELF-CONFIDENCE: To work well with gifted adolescents also requires confidence in themselves as teachers and as learners. They have to believe that not only are all young people capable of learning, but also that teachers have a critical role to play in coaching that learning. It takes more confidence to be a guide on the side than it does to be a controlling sage on the stage.

TEACHERS NEED TO TAKE CHARGE OF CURRICULUM DESIGN:
In the introduction to their book, Teachers as Curriculum Planners: Narratives of Experience, Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin point out the tension that always exists between those who would prescribe curriculum and the teachers and students who eventually live out the curriculum. They focus on the narratives of teachers and the experiences they have had with students on the front line in the classroom:

> In all this talk about school reform, there is little sense
> of the tremendous power and potential in the experience
> of classroom teachers. We understand how spirited
> teachers may revolutionize their practices through
> reflection on their own experiences and new ideas, and
> how they can transform new ideas into powerful
> curriculum programmes through this reflective process.[10]

ENTHUSIASM IS CONTAGIOUS. It cannot be built into the curriculum as an objective to be achieved, but it is a key factor in the teaching and learning process. Teachers who are enthusiastic and genuinely excited about

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[10] Ibid., p.xv

teaching and learning are highly effective. As they model their own excitement, and create a climate in which enthusiasm and passion for learning are valued, they stimulate the imagination and the inquiry that is at the heart of self-directed learning.

TEACHERS AFFECT THE PRESENT AND FUTURE: Teachers are very important people. Teachers do not only teach; they reach into the heads and hearts of young people. They design and develop curricula which offer opportunities for young people to grow and reach their potential.

It has been thirty years since Mr. Bourdon taught me to look into my heart, yet his influence is still there. It has been twenty-four years since Dr. Roy guided my imagination and intelligence to read with an inquiring mind and heart, yet the spark to continue reading and thinking still burns brightly. Neither of these teachers would take credit for what they have done. They would believe that their role was secondary to the learner's own thirst for knowledge and desire to achieve. Such reticence is understandable in teachers who believe in making learners more responsible and more autonomous. However, independent learning does not mean isolated learning. The path to increased independence is enlightened by a competent teacher who guides, encourages, coaches, and provides opportunities to learn how to learn. Meeting one's potential seems more achievable with the guidance and coaching of caring teachers who reach out and touch lives.

CHAPTER TWO: CURRICULA FOR GIFTED ADOLESCENTS

CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH GIFTED LEARNERS

There are certainly some key traits associated with giftedness. Most students demonstrate at least some of these characteristics in various settings and situations. Gifted students are more likely to demonstrate most of these traits in a variety of situations over a period of time. [11] Ken Weber, in his chapter on giftedness in his book Special Education in Ontario Schools (1993), outlines the characteristics that follow below. Some of these characteristics can be considered as strengths or as needs. Anyone designing curricula for gifted adolescents should consider this list.

*Many gifted adolescents have had a wide range of experiences and opportunities in their lives.

*They are often avid readers who have developed a wide range of interests and a broad general knowledge of facts and trivia.

* They are likely gifted in the area of language, having developed a strong sense of language, vocabulary and expression which may show in oral or written language skills.

* They are generally considered to be curious, asking interesting questions and seeking legitimate answers to those questions.

*When information is presented, gifted students are often able to grasp concepts quickly, and they can retain, synthesize and generate insights. They are not usually very motivated by repeating what they have learned. Instead, they want to go the next step and apply the learning to a new situation or use.

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[11] Weber, K. Special Education in Ontario Schools, p.76

* They often enjoy working independently and once their curiosity is whetted, they may have little patience working with others.

*These students often come up with creative responses and interesting ways of solving problems, whether in literature, mathematics, logic, or real life.

* They are persistent in their desire to know, but may not be as persistent in following through with a plan to meet their goals.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GIFTED LEARNERS

Many people assume that because learners have been labelled "Gifted", they should always achieve high marks and rank better than their peers in any academic pursuit. In fact, actual achievement may be significantly lower than ability. Gifted adolescents seem to thrive in an environment which allows them some scope, choice and creative expression. They do have the ability to excel; however, if that ability is held in check in a teacher-controlled curriculum and classroom, gifted adolescents may choose not to use their ability to its full potential.

Task commitment is not necessarily higher in gifted learners. They are typical adolescents in that they will choose to work as much or as little as they can get away with at times. However, their task commitment is demonstrated most often in an environment that stimulates interest and commitment. Again, it can be argued that independent learning, with its emphasis on self-selected topics and self-directed timelines and learning goals, is more likely to allow students the opportunity to demonstrate task commitment.

A third common misconception is that gifted students are frequently bookish, "nerdy" uninterested in social contact, and isolated. While this may be true of some, and it is certainly a stereotype promoted by television and other media, it is not always the case. Many gifted adolescents are well-rounded young people who are just as enthusiastic about sports, cars and the opposite sex as "normal" teenagers.

A fourth misconception is that all teachers would love to teach an entire class of gifted learners. In fact, gifted learners can be very frustrating for many teachers. Although their characteristics are indicative of a strong potential to learn, many gifted learners are not necessarily good students. Their determination to know and to identify what is important and valuable to them at a particular time may not be "in synch" with the objectives and timelines established in many traditional curricula.

ASSESSMENT OF GIFTEDNESS

Although several methods of assessment and identification are listed below, it is important to remember that no one method is considered to be suitable. One interesting aspect of assessment is the fact that intrinsic drive and motivation are essential. A student who decides that he or she is not interested in the assessment, or is not doing it for a valid and legitimate reason, may deliberately do poorly. Those who see the testing procedure as nothing but a bureaucratic, nonsensical activity may deliberately do poorly just to prove a point. Perhaps this is one of the other characteristics of many gifted adolescents. They often have a heightened sense of what they consider right or wrong, valid or "dumb". When they sense no commitment to the task at hand, they seldom choose to perform it to the best of their ability.

Therefore, in order to assess giftedness, one should build a profile of the learner's strengths and needs over a period of time. Some of the instruments below may contribute some information, but a holistic approach within the curriculum is essential for discovering the potential to learn and achieve.

TESTING

Students who are gifted seem to stand out from their peers. The main criterion used to determine giftedness is the Intelligence test given in the primary grades. A student who scores 135+ on this test is generally identified as gifted. As well as the IQ score, students are evaluated on a number of observable criteria such as apparent creativity, problem-solving skills, leadership and communication skills.

Traditional IQ tests give a reasonably accurate assessment of what an individual has been taught and remembers, as well as what he has been exposed to to that point in life. An IQ test is supposed to measure potential; in fact, it appears to measure only the current performance. Students who score significantly higher than their peers obviously have a higher performance at that point. The assumption has always been that an IQ test is a valid predictor of one's potential to learn.

Widely used tests in Ontario school systems are the Otis-Lennon and the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (1974), now referred to as the WISC III. The Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational battery revised (1990) seems to be gaining in popularity. Also commonly used in Ontario schools are the Canadian Achievement test (1983) and the Peabody Individual Achievement Test. In these, various aspects of reading comprehension and language skills are evaluated, as well as a number of mathematics skills. Scores are standardized and norm-referenced. Ability tests tend to focus on the thinking skills which each student brings to the testing situation. Two tests are widely used in Ontario schools: The Ross Test of Higher Cognitive Skills and the Canadian Cognitive Abilities test(1982).

OBSERVATION

It is important to observe students over a period of time. In school, the key observer and assessor is the classroom teacher who is most aware of the attitudes and experiences which the learner is bringing to any situation. Alongside the assessment of the teacher, self- assessment is critical. Only the student him or herself knows the ideas, attitudes, feelings, concerns and thoughts which might affect the learning. Collaborative assessment with the teacher and the learner in partnership optimizes the amount of information gained from assessment.

With young children, the parents' observation and feedback is also very important. They are the keepers of much of the information which has made the child what he or she is. They know the developmental milestones, interests, concerns, resources and habits of the child. However, as the child

enters high school, the parents' voice becomes less significant in the ongoing assessment. In the adolescent years, young people want to take over their own self-assessment. They often are more willing to perform well and to communicate with chosen teachers than with parents. A good teacher promotes self-assessment and teaches students to take charge of their own learning.

THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFICATION

The formal process for identifying all special education needs in Ontario schools is clearly established and laid out in Bill 82 [12] and its associated regulations. Once it has been determined through assessment (by use of various tests and observations) that a student meets the established criteria for giftedness, the parents are given the legal right to participate in the identification process and are invited to attend the meeting of the local Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC). The IPRC is composed of a principal or board supervisor, special education teacher and other teachers. It is the role of the IPRC to evaluate the case of each student brought forward as having special needs, to decide whether those students should be labelled as exceptional, identify them appropriately, recommend the most appropriate placement and programme, and review the decisions on an annual basis.

It is important that parents educate themselves about Bill 82 and its implications. They should be well aware of the exceptionality, the identification, the placement, and the programme being recommended. No parent should be expected to sign the official forms without a clear, jargon-free understanding of what it means for his or her child. The purpose of the annual review is to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme and the placement. The key questions asked should be:

Are the child's strengths being developed?

What are the student's current needs?

What opportunities have been offered to the student?

[12] Bill 82, Ontario Ministry of Education, (1982)

How have the student's needs been addressed in the past year?

Is he or she achieving potential in this placement?

If not, what needs to happen: a more effective placement, counselling, increased monitoring, more discipline, or more creative opportunities?

All of these questions should be answerable by the special education teacher who is responsible for the mandatory annual review of the student's growth and achievement. At this review, appropriate changes, successful strategies, and effective programmes are recorded and discussed. The Annual review is most effective when students themselves are invited to be part of the review process. For example, the written profile of their strengths, needs, and recommended programming can be shared with young people who are interested. This is the perfect opportunity to have the learner record programmes or activities in which he or she experienced most success. Many gifted learners want to record their need for opportunities for independent learning, self-direction, and variety. Seldom do gifted students ask for more teacher-centered lessons or step by step learning. They usually are seeking increased autonomy and self-direction.

POSSIBLE PLACEMENTS AND PROGRAMMES

The key factor is not the placement that is offered—whether it be regular, enrichment, withdrawal or segregated gifted—but the quality of the programme in its assessment of the learner's strengths and needs. The programme should not be pre-determined. Instead, it should build on the strengths and meet the unique needs of the individual learners.

REGULAR CLASSROOM

The student remains in the regular classroom and works through the same curriculum as everyone else. Any enrichment is provided outside the curriculum, as extra-curricular, family or community activities and involvements. Students may choose to ignore their giftedness and hope they will be left alone to make their own way through school. In many cases, they have decided, based on their elementary school placements and programmes,

that being gifted is more of a curse than a blessing. In such cases, they don't want to be singled out from their peers as being different, smarter, or as teachers' pets. Often, their parents are still interested in maintaining the label of giftedness, but the students themselves would rather forget it. It would be a challenge for someone to investigate this phenomenon. This seems to happen most with those students who want the acceptance of their classmates and peers. Both male and female students who seek to be popular are afraid of being singled out if they appear to be too bright.

Those adolescents who don't want to be singled out can gain access to the support of a special education resource teacher who understands generally the special strengths and needs of giftedness, and also comes to know each student as an individual. The gifted resource teacher reviews the student's school records, and interviews the student, then develops a sense of who the student is, how he or she learns best, and what he or she needs in order to optimize potential and performance. This assessment may, in fact, be done from afar. In the time spent together, especially over the student's career, the role of the teacher becomes one of mentor, counsellor and advocate. Students feel free to drop in and know that someone knows and understands them. Sometimes the special education teacher to the gifted plays a parental role, giving advice, a shoulder to cry on, someone to listen, or a resource who knows about special programmes, camps and opportunities. For many students, their relationship can be a very valuable one.

ENRICHMENT LEVEL COURSES

Students may choose enrichment level courses in academic subjects: English, French, Social Sciences, Math, and Science. In these courses, which are university-oriented, students are challenged to cover the same course content as in advanced level classes in less time. Time made available is then used for problem-solving, experimentation, contests, research, long-term projects , and differentiated experiences related to the subject content but beyond those in the regular classroom.

One problem with this approach is that the enrichment sometimes may not be allowed until after the "regular" curriculum is covered. Enrichment is considered an add-on or an extra workload. Many gifted students realize very quickly that being in enrichment level courses may have distinct disadvantages. A second problem sometimes arises if enrichment level course teachers want students to learn the subject-content in the same way they might have mastered it themselves: with step-by step lessons, repetition, practice, discipline, effort and work habits. This may work with most students. However, students who are gifted may be very impatient with such routines. They want to get directly to the heart of the matter. They enjoy the thinking and the challenge of working through a process to arrive at their own observations and conclusions. They lack patience with a teacher-centred approach which controls the learning and metes it out bit by bit. Thus, some teachers of enrichment level courses may become frustrated because these young people are not necessarily interested in pleasing the teacher and in following established procedures. At times, those who are identified gifted actually achieve lower grades than students who have less innate ability but are more committed to the task at hand and more willing to co-operate with the steps and procedures established by the teacher.

SPECIAL COURSES

A third approach in high schools is to provide an enriching course not specifically related to particular subject areas. Such a course tries to focus student attention on learning to learn across the curriculum. It may be called an "Autonomous Learner Course" or "Self-directed learning", "Interdisciplinary Studies", or may take a particular theme such as "Great Minds; Great Ideas". The course is offered as an opportunity for students to experiment, take risks, and stretch their understanding of the world and of themselves.

Joseph Renzulli's Enrichment Triad Model, first outlined in 1977,[13] has been instrumental in shaping how people develop enrichment programmes for gifted learners. In that model, Renzulli writes about three particular characteristics:
*above-average abilities
*high level of task commitment
*creativity
Using a Venn diagram, Renzulli captures the need for the interplay of all three components. The point at which they all overlap can be a very dynamic time and place for those involved. Those times, when the high ability, task commitment and creativity all come together, are probably not very frequent.

For some educators, the element that seems to be missing is task commitment. They see young people with great ability and creativity who may not be performing and achieving well at all as a result of work ethic or task commitment. However, the secret to task commitment often lies in the task itself. If it is something that the student has chosen based on personal interest and curiosity to know or to achieve, the student is more likely to be task-committed. A curriculum which fosters independent learning, with its opportunities for self-selected topics and some say in managing time and pace, is likely to generate those moments where all three of Renzulli's criteria come together.

Renzulli developed his ideas about giftedness into a model for curriculum referred to as an Enrichment Triad (1977). In the triad, three levels of activity are incorporated. Type I activities are exploratory in nature, designed to expose pupils to a range of ideas, fields, and topics not ordinarily covered. Such activities might include field trips, visitors, speakers, or demonstrations. Type II activities involve training the group to develop thinking skill, processes, research skills and the personal and social skills required to get along. Type III activities involve investigation and research by individuals or groups. Students investigate problems, topics and

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[13] Joseph Renzulli,The Enrichment Triad Model (1977)

issues of personal concern. The role of the classroom teacher is to help students frame their thinking into researchable problems and projects. The students become problem-solvers and researchers; the teacher takes on the role of coach, encouraging progress and suggesting explorations. This role of the teacher suggested by Renzulli, one which is appropriate and effective for gifted students, is not a traditional one.

A MORE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

In traditional curriculum design, teachers control the objectives and content to be taught and are in charge of the teaching and evaluation strategies to be used. Students tend to be passive receivers of curriculum which is transmitted or delivered from sender to receivers. Curriculum design is often done by subject teachers, who may work with a consultant from their local board. Rarely are students involved in designing, developing, or modifying the curriculum. The transmission model of teaching assumes the teacher as the bearer of knowledge. His or her job is to transmit information to students who will receive and use it. The conventional focus is on teachers transmitting facts, then evaluating the learning of the students by use of memory recall.

Generally speaking, this approach discourages divergent thinking. It assumes one right answer; everyone is encouraged to adopt the same point of view and perspective on a situation. Thus, rather than being encouraged to brainstorm and think creatively and critically, students are taught to write thesis essays which develop arguments supporting only one point of view. De Bono refers to this as the academic idiom which requires a cluster of abilities:

> a good memory; an ability to understand and
> relate; verbal fluency and clarity of expression;
> an imaging ability that allows one to cope with
> complex situations; an ability to tackle difficult
> situations; and an interest in the subject material.[14]

.[14] Edward De Bono Thinking: CORT-VI Action Teacher's Handbook.(1976) p.1

De Bono commented further that all of these abilities are concerned with passively receiving or "taking in" material. Given the characteristics and capabilities of gifted learners, the traditional approach is not the most appropriate and effective curriculum to build on their strengths and meet their needs.

AN APPROPRIATE CURRICULUM FOR GIFTED LEARNERS

The curriculum that best builds on the strengths and meets the needs of gifted adolescents is one which fosters increased independence. Empowering young people to become more autonomous and more in charge of their own learning enables them to become more in charge of their lives too. This view of curriculum is empowering and positive. It makes curriculum relevant to the lives of the students, and to the personal knowledge and lives of the teachers who are working with those students.

The basic belief of the writer of this project is in the need for a curriculum model which is adaptable to the unique needs and strengths of the learners. The model is in place to provide a framework for the curriculum, but it cannot be worked out in detail without the involvement of the students.

A THREE-STAGE MODEL FOR CURRICULUM DESIGN

The first stage, ASSESSING LEARNING BACKGROUND involves self- and teacher assessment of strengths and needs. Instead of establishing objectives before the curriculum begins, stage one assesses attitudes, strengths and needs, then establishes negotiated learning goals.

Stage two, WORKING TOWARDS GROWTH AND ACHIEVEMENT provides opportunities and activities to build on the strengths and meet the needs of learners. The second stage provides activities to build confidence and competence in the learners as they get continual feedback from their teacher and classmates.

Stage three, SUMMATIVE EVALUATION OF LEARNING, provides opportunities to demonstrate (using tests, examinations or projects).what has

been learned. The curriculum ends when both self-and teacher evaluation of learning take place. Reports on learners should include a statement of how their strengths and needs have been met, and should make recommendations and suggestions for improvement.

The three-stage model differs from traditional approaches. In contrast to a more traditional teacher-centred approach, students have increased control over what is taught, learned, and evaluated. Students are not just permitted to make choices. They are actually launched into various phases of decision-making, because it is the ability to make wise decisions that will transform their lives. Brown believes that the intent of education is to teach the individual how to make wise decisions. If this object is to be realized, then students must have many more opportunities for making choices. In his book Education By Appointment (1968), Dr. Frank Brown reiterates this point:

> Learning is the ability to tolerate and evaluate
> choices. In a world which has been rocked
> by the rapid explosion of knowledge, teaching
> must be subordinated to learning, and the school's
> curricula centred around:
>
> 1. Learning by Inquiry
> 2. Learning by Doing
> 3. Capturing the Imagination
> 4. Stimulating Reason
> 5. Learning by Discovering,Testing, and Even Failing and
>   Trying Again[15]

Learning transforms lives. People who are encouraged to make decisions about their own learning gradually evolve into more competent and confident people who inquire, reason, and evaluate their own learning. People whose potential to learn has been unleashed become active participants in their own learning. With encouragement, they develop the confidence and competence, insight, imagination, and passion to keep on growing, achieving, and meeting their potential. This kind of curriculum is good for all students;

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[15] Frank Brown Education By Appointment(1968) p. 33

it is particularly appropriate and effective for gifted learners who demonstrate unique strengths and needs.

As with any curriculum, the key to good teaching is to understand the strengths and needs of the learner. It is also important to create a learning environment which values thought, reflection, analysis, creativity and personal response. Such a healthy environment provides a rich abundance for information and observations on which to base one's assessment of the student's unique characteristics, strengths, and needs. It is important to design and develop effective and appropriate programmes which allow students to achieve their potential as independent learners. Knowing the learner is the first important step.

The next chapter describes my own experiences in using the three-stage model as a framework for designing and developing effective and appropriate curricula for gifted learners. The three experiences narrated involve my own role as classroom teacher of OAC English, co-author of a de-streamed Transition Year (Grade 9) English programme, and as coach of an Interdisciplinary programme for gifted/highly able adolescent learners, Thus, the chapter characterizes a curriculum approach which has been used and shown to be effective in three very different situations.

CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE

I have used this model of curriculum design in several classroom situations and have found it to be very effective and adaptable. The model was developed in collaboration with a colleague, Damian Cooper of the Halton Board of Education. Damian and I were hired to design and develop an OAIP (Ontario Assessment Instrument Pool) of assessment strategies and resources for use in Basic Level English Programmes across the province. The project, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, involved two years of planning, sharing ideas, visiting classrooms, interviewing teachers, presenting draft materials, field-testing approaches and finally coming up with a practical and publishable bank of resources and strategies.

The results of our work were published in 1990. There were thirteen books in a series called Basic English OAIP[16]. The first book engaged teachers with ideas and basic beliefs about assessment and evaluation. The second book was more practical in nature, providing many resources, strategies, and materials for integrating assessment and evaluation with curriculum. The remaining eleven books provided thematic curriculum units which showed specifically how to integrate assessment and evaluation with curriculum. The key principle was that assessment and evaluation should not occur in isolation; to be effective and valid, assessment must be an integral part of the curriculum.

The Basic English OAIP was received very favourably by teachers across the province. Not only did it make good sense, but there were concrete examples given for making it work. During implementation workshops, we frequently heard how the ideas and strategies could be readily adapted to students at all levels, including gifted. In workshops and classroom visits, it soon became apparent that many teachers felt most confident in the area of summative evaluation which included tests, exams, numbers and grades. They

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[16]Ontario Ministry of Education, Basic English OAIP, 1990

also had some experience with assessment activities which were formative in nature, providing useful feedback to the learners. Where teachers felt least confident was in diagnostic assessment, assessing the learning background of students. Many teachers admitted that they dove right into curriculum activities without taking time to assess the attitudes, interests, strengths, needs, and past experiences of the learners. For students in Basic level, this assessment was important because there were so many wrong assumptions about slow learners. Yet the time for initial diagnostic assessment is just as significant and relevant in designing effective programmes for gifted students. People assume a great deal about the gifted students; sometimes their assumptions are wrong.

O.A.C. ENGLISH COURSE

When I completed the OAIP Ministry Project and returned to the classroom, I was eager to try to follow the three-stage model in English classrooms. It's one thing to sit in a comfortable office with time to think about, collaborate on, produce and refine written curriculum documents. Yet, when I walked into my summer school English OAC class in the summer of 1991, I realized my first experience would be nerve-wracking. I was afraid I had lost my ability to be a practitioner and felt self-conscious about the role of experimenting with curriculum ideas Damian and I had designed and developed as theories.

Traditionally, the first day of a new course is spent in a lot of teacher-talk presenting an overview of the course content, units, major assignments and evaluation system. For years, I had spent the first day of a new course telling people the list of books, giving some indication of workload and then starting right into the first piece of literature. By the end of the first few hours together, I had already covered some of the curriculum objectives. To practise what I now preached, I needed to change that approach. I had to establish very quickly that my role was as coach and guide; the students were going to be actively involved in negotiating the goals, timelines, and evaluation criteria.

STAGE ONE: ASSESSING LEARNING BACKGROUND

Despite my anxiety at trying something new, I decided to spend time assessing the learning background of the students. On the first day, I drew a full circle on the board, and explaining that this was a representation of the entire OAC English programme. We then brainstormed the areas that would be emphasized and evaluated in the course. After some discussion, we agreed on four areas and allocated a percentage to each:

Work and Study Habits and Independent Learning: 20%

(assigned reading, contribution to discussion, participation, assignments, attitude, attendance, preparation for learning, willingness to try)

Oral Language Skills: 20%

(Listening, presenting and speaking alone and in groups)

Written Language Skills: 30%

(essay, argument, creative writing and response to literature)

Tests and Examinations: 30%

(synthesizing and demonstrating what had been learned)

After we had established these criteria, I asked students to comment. Many admitted they were surprised to know ahead of time what the curriculum goals were. They had reached their final high school English course without a clear picture of what had been expected. They saw teachers as being in control and had remained passive, not active, participants in their learning.

They were also taken aback by my willingness to negotiate some of the criteria and the value assigned to each. I explained that I valued these four areas. If they were going on to university, these areas and skills would become gradually more important. They seemed to understand that rationale.

At this point, since there were only 16 students (an ideal summer school class--the discussion, sharing, mutual support and feedback that evolved was quite remarkable), we moved into a circle and I sat with the students as a participant. We introduced ourselves and gave some background information. Before the first break, the students produced their first learning log, a reflective piece of writing in which they had to assess their strengths and

needs in each of the four areas, and make an initial statement about what they hoped to accomplish that summer.

During the first break, I met with the teacher of the other OAC English class; he was using a more traditional approach. He had already taught a poem and had given the students specific questions to guide their analysis. When we shared notes, I panicked somewhat. I was hesitant to tell him that all my group had done was get to know each other and write a personal learning log. I did tell him that I had been assessing their learning background and was busy negotiating curriculum goals based on in individual strengths and needs. It sounded reasonable, but in my heart, I wanted to retreat to the traditional approach and dive right into impressing the students with my knowledge of the literature on the curriculum.

However, when the students returned from their break, I shared with them the fact that a curriculum was more than a list of books we were to study and "do" together. Instead, it would be an opportunity, in their last high school English course, to develop increased competence in English and confidence as learners and as people before they headed off to university.

Then I posed the following questions and asked the students to prepare personal responses. I intended to listen carefully and to modify the curriculum based on what they had to say. The questions were:
1. Why did you take this course this summer?
2. What do you intend to get out of the course?
3. With what do you want me to provide you?
4. What are your goals in this course?
5. What are you willing to do to meet those goals?
6. How do you feel about taking this course at this time with this teacher and these classmates?

I had never asked those questions overtly before. That day was a real eye-opener. The first student, Sharron, spoke confidently and announced in one breath that she was 34, had taken her last English course 17 years before,

then had gotten pregnant and left school. She was determined to come back to school to prove to herself and her three children that she could complete her formal education. She was excited, eager, and terrified. (In fact, she felt much the same way I did--an observation I later shared with her. We made a deal. I'd coach her learning; she'd coach my teaching!)

The second student, Michael, couldn't have been more different. He was only 16, and had been asked to leave his local high school before completing the one course necessary for graduation. He assured me that all he wanted was a 50 so that he could "get the hell out" of high school forever. Here's a sample of what Mike wrote in his first learning log entry:

> All I want is the credit. I could spend all day playing
> games and attempting to be Mr English, but there are
> more important considerations during the next four
> weeks. I need the credit so I can be done with this whole
> waste of time called high school Not to sound grim,
> defeatist, or pessimistic, but we're all just playing our
> own game.[17]

I was glad to know where he stood. There would be no point in my spending an excess amount of time marking diligently to show him how to get well above the 50. I appreciated his honesty, but the calmness on my face belied the panic of my heart. Although I didn't feel confident enough to be challenged every day by discipline problems and rebellious youth, I appeared calm and went on.

Beside Mike was Tammy, a teacher's dream: enthusiastic, positive, excited about school, bubbly, and willing to work as hard as it took to get an "A". I couldn't believe that my angry young man had somehow been firmly ensconced between Sharron and Tammy. It seemed that Mike was fated!

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[17] Mike Hansen Learning log Entry, July 5, 1991

From that point on around the circle, each student had a different story to tell. They had all come from various schools, with various backgrounds, experiences, attitudes and concerns. Many were interesting, but three stuck out immediately. Kara was obviously bright, bored and passive. Sue's personal life was a disaster as she wrestled with a strict home, a demanding boyfriend and the pressures of two jobs. Eun-ho was a quiet young Korean man who spoke very little English but was determined to get into a Canadian university. It would be a real challenge to help these young people do their personal best and work together as a learning team, finding common ground with others.

I shared with them my values in teaching, and emphasized strongly that my role was that of coach or guide. At their age, they had to take charge of their own learning, establish their own goals and move steadfastly towards them. There wasn't time to waste. Then they wrote their second learning log, a full page letter to me as their teacher and coach, sharing what was going on in their minds. They had to make a firm statement about specifically what they intended to get out of our time and opportunities together as teacher and learners, and what they intended to contribute to their own learning and to that of the other students.

That week spent with a strong focus on self-assessment was a learning experience for me as well as the students. I had always believed that an enthusiastic, knowledgeable and interesting teacher was the key to learning. That week I saw that the key was a teacher who coached the learners towards increased confidence, competence and autonomy. Empowering the learners, providing opportunities for self-assessment and reflection, and establishing a climate and curriculum that would unleash the potential of the students, were important steps.

STAGE TWO: WORKING TOWARDS AND ASSESSING GROWTH

After the initial stage of self assessment, we used class time together as an opportunity for more traditional English curriculum: reading, writing, speaking and listening. All these curricular activities related to the goals of

the course--that students would develop increased competence in English and increased confidence in themselves as learners and people.

This period of setting the stage and establishing the climate for learning took most to the first four hours-- the equivalent of nearly a week of regular class time, yet it was time well spent. When we finally began to read Oedipus Rex together, it was interesting to establish parallels to the student's own experiences. Oedipus too had a background and experiences which had formed him into what he had become. It didn't take long before we came to the insight that Oedipus' tragic flaw was his failure to assess and evaluate himself and his situation before embarking on words, curses and actions. The students quickly saw him as a man of action, but someone who had never paused to reflect, to discover himself, and to establish goals. His hubris had blinded him to reality. Oedipus had surrounded himself with people who allowed him to remain blind; they all preferred ignorance to the truth.

Students were asked to write a third learning log. This time, they were to draw parallels showing how their own lives were like Oedipus'. Many of them wrote about the voyage of self-discovery on which they were about to embark . They enjoyed the fact that we were approaching the Oedipus story as a metaphor for understanding and gaining insight into themselves. Their learning logs revealed that many of them were capable of making the connections and finding the common ground between themselves and Oedipus Rex, I knew we were well on our journey.

In a more traditional approach to the study of Oedipus Rex, I would have introduced the history of the Greek theatre and composed questions to guide the students' understanding of the play. Students would have read aloud and discussed each scene and written answers to my questions about the text. Gradually, through such a close study, they may have arrived at the same insights; however, using discussion of their own lives, goals, achievements and obstacles was a more effective springboard into the text. The time we had spent establishing a climate of openness and self-reflection had been a valuable prelude to reading and understanding the literature.

Throughout the four week period, five hours a day, the varied opportunities offered in the curriculum led these young people to be intimately connected to the literature and to each other. They supported and encouraged each other to be there, on time and prepared. They challenged each other, and reminded themselves of our common goals. Sharron became a group mother holding everyone together and keeping them focussed. Because of her own ambition to get her OACs and gain entrance to university, she was a driving force.

As a postscript, Sharron got into the University of Guelph a year later, moved into the Honours English programme and won a scholarship for her writing. She was seriously considering a career in teaching last time I spoke to her. Stories like hers are what teaching is all about—making a difference in the life of another person by creating a climate for discovery, growth, and achievement of potential.

She was not the only student who experienced growth and achievement that summer. On the third day of the programme, in the midst of a lesson about Sophocles' purpose in creating and presenting the Oedipus story, Tammy asked why she had felt compelled to cry as she had watched Les Miserables. Several gave examples, but it was Mike who understood the concept and offered the word catharsis. He understood the need for cleansing of emotions, and the arousal of fear and pity which, according to Aristotle, is at the heart of tragedy. When I heard his answer and remembered only a few days before his sullenness and refusal to strive beyond a 50, I sensed something happening within Michael.

He approached me alone at the end of the first week, waning to talk about catharsis. He explained that he had been for several years a heavy user of drugs; the release of drugs gave him the catharsis, the cleansing he felt his heart needed when pain became unbearable. Until that week, he had never considered the fact that literature could bring about emotional release. By empathizing with Oedipus, and generating the pity and fear elicited by Oedipus' plight, he was discovering the healing power of literature. Literature

and the teaching situation were affecting him profoundly. No-one would ever write a curriculum objective that could encapsulate what Mike was learning. For once in his learning career, the walls were coming down.

He admitted that he had entered the course assuming it would be "more of the same old crap, figuring out how high you had to jump to keep the teacher happy", then went on to say that he felt different now. He wanted to show what he could do. He knew he was clever and had read widely. He had been identified gifted in grade four but had spent much of his time in high school fighting the system. Expending his energy in trying so hard to be different, he had lost sight of any other goals. He now wanted to hand in every assignment on time, and be the best in the class to prove to himself that he could do it. He did achieve that goal. With coaching, encouragement, and a lot of pressure, he earned over 90% in the course.

At the same time I was teaching this OAC course, I was attending McMaster, taking a course in curriculum designed on narratives of experience. At that course, I was able to talk about some of my daily narratives and experiences; then, each morning, back in my own classroom, I shared what I had learned in the evening course. Thus, the students saw their teacher as a learner alongside them, working towards growth and achievement. I too was on a journey to discovery. For example, the curriculum course on narratives of experience challenged us, at times rather uncomfortably, to examine and evaluate our inherent prejudices and biases. I had never really considered the cultural background and diversity of the students to be significant to the classroom curriculum.

As an experiment, I decided to set up one oral language learning opportunity where each student was to teach a lesson to the others. In that lesson, which could be on any subject, they had to introduce or share one aspect of their own cultural background. Students learned Croatian dances (just as the world was slowly discovering the horrors occurring in Yugoslavia that summer). They made Korean delicacies and ate other ethnic foods such as: suchi, haggis, cabbage rolls, quiche and perogies. They heard about different

customs in raising children and in celebrating holidays. But, most of all, they learned tolerance and respect for each other's similarities and differences.

When it was time to write formal essays, my experiences as a student again proved useful. I had recently been required to read aloud the opening page of my major essay to the rest of my McMaster graduate English class. I shared with the students my own fears and sense of humiliation that I had not felt as competent as many students much younger than I. Yet, although I had anticipated so much criticism that I had fought back tears and stumbled over words as I read, I had survived the experience. As well, I had gained a lot of honest feedback and good suggestions for improvement and further development. I then challenged my own class to try the strategy of reading their opening pages aloud. As each student read, we sometimes winced, and appeared confused or puzzled, but we listened and gave suggestions and feedback. By the end of that period, each student had a more workable thesis, more effectively stated as an arguable position. Consequently, the experience of being a teacher and a learner at the same time had proved valuable.

STAGE THREE: SUMMATIVE EVALUATION OF LEARNING

When it came time to set the final examination, I considered what the goals of the course had been. There was no sense asking students to regurgitate what we had discussed. Instead, I wanted to see individuality and autonomy in their responses. I tried to maintain the tone of reflecting on the literature and finding common ground with themselves. That exam allowed them to synthesize and demonstrate what we had all been doing that summer. The most interesting question was this one:

Think back over your learning experiences in this course. Reflect on the particular strengths and needs you brought into the classroom. Write a personal essay, letter, poem, script, monologue, dialogue, or short story in which you express your assessment of each of the following:
a) your strengths, interests, and needs,
b) one learning opportunity that made an impact on you,
c) your progress or growth, and decisions you've made about future goals.

Most students said they had enjoyed writing the exam. It stimulated not only their recall of knowledge, but also their imagination and self-reflection. The summative evaluation forced them to determine whether or not they had moved towards the goals they had set for themselves. What had they learned? Why? How would they apply what they had learned to the next learning situation? For once, I did not dread examination answers which regurgitated everything I already knew. It was fun to sense the students' growing competence and confidence with language and the expression of ideas. Much of the writing seemed genuine and honest. Sample student responses follow.

"In a very short four weeks, I have gained the confidence to move on to university. I can't believe how involved I became in this class..."

"This has been a whole new world for us. Well, onward and upward. All I can think about is the chorus to a song:

> We can build this dream together
>
> Stand in line forever,
>
> Nothing's going to stop us now.

I love it. I feel good."

"I feel that I have grown from a person who was self-conscious, with no self-confidence in schoolwork. Now I feel more confident. I don't worry about things as much as I used to. I have also changed my attitude towards school."

"I have really enjoyed this class. You have encouraged me to go on with academic learning. I have decided that I will go on to university and become a teacher. I have learned that I do have strengths...I have also realized that I have particular learning needs. I like to participate and to have information presented visually. Acting out King Lear helped me understand and get a feel for what made the characters tick. "

The following answer, written by Eun-Ho, who did not speak much for the first two weeks was my personal favourite:

I want to tell you how the learning experiences you
offered to me were so great. I now express myself much
better in English. I have always been interested in finding
meanings in life. This class was full of life's meanings...
The best opportunity for me was the chance to discuss. I could
feel more and understand better when we shared our
ideas. There was some striking and impressive knowledge...
Not only have I progressed in this English subject, but I have
also progressed as a learner and have felt a lot as a human.
It was great for me to understand the depth of literature. I
have asked myself what is more important--the body or the
soul. My answer is, of course, the soul. So from now on,
I will work harder to put more ideas in my head than food
in my mouth...This learning experience has given me more
than just a credit.[18]

Near the end of the course, Eun-Ho presented his independent study on
literature related to sailing. In his presentation, he taught us how to make an
origami sailboat, then to play a Korean game with our paper boats, He ended
with these words:

When I first came to Canada I was so aware of how different I
was. I thought all Canadian kids were very different from me
and I would never be happy or comfortable here. Now I see that
as we are learning, we are really all in the same boat going over
the same rough water. We are not so different after all, you and I.

As he spoke those words, I felt truly blessed that I had taken risks with
those young people by letting them take charge of their own learning. I had
invited them to bring their own cultural background into the English
classroom. I had put my energy into creating a climate in which they could

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[18]Eun-Ho Joo, Examination Answer, Aug.3, 1991

develop competence, confidence, and autonomy. With coaching, these learners had evolved far beyond what I could have imagined.

I still wonder at the epiphany moments of that summer, a time in a teaching career that may never be repeated. What made the difference? the particular blend of young people? my experience? my enthusiasm? my desire to learn and to experiment? That parallel teacher/learner role, along with the dichotomy of the theorist/practitioner made me particularly introspective and reflective. My students benefitted from my willingness to reflect and my belief that they too should discover much about themselves.

ON COMMON GROUND: GRADE 9 DESTREAMED CURRICULUM

On Common Ground,[19] the first in a series of three books, was published in February, 1994 by Oxford University Press. The series, co-authored by Jerry George, Don Stone, and myself, was designed for use in Transition years classrooms, grades 7-9. Since the inception of the project, I have had the pleasure of being involved in designing an approach, selecting appropriate literature, developing teaching and learning resources, and integrating assessment and evaluation strategies with the three stages of the curriculum. The experience of working with Jerry George (the Education officer responsible for establishing the English curriculum guidelines for the province of Ontario until he recently retired) and Don Stone (English co-ordinator for the Windsor Board of Education) was professionally challenging and rewarding. Our passion for the teaching of English often led us into heated debate, but the design of the series emerged out of ongoing deliberation and mutual respect. Both Don and Jerry had extensive experience designing and implementing curriculum; I had a strong base in classroom experience. Together, as an author-team, we reaped personal and professional rewards from the experience.

RATIONALE

On Common Ground is an anthology of highly engaging literature, relevant to the lives of adolescents. The accompanying Teacher's Resource provides a wide range of strategies and resources showing teachers how to approach the literature. On Common Ground is unique in its strong focus on self-assessment.

Despite the varied cultural, ethnic, geographic, socio-economic, and political differences which will inevitably exist across Canada, many students

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18 J. George, D. Stone, and F. Ward, On Common Ground,Oxford University Press (1994)

will find much in common by reading narratives which focus on relevant issues that are significant in the lives of the students. On Common Ground is a curriculum intended for students in grade 9, approximately 13-15 years of age. Most young people of this age group are entering secondary school and dealing with the concerns, conflicts, decisions, and demands that arise with increasing frequency. Many are probably trying to work out identity issues and to determine who they really are and what they want and need. They are learning to assess their own strengths, talents, needs, and desires. This is a time of questioning the constraints established by family commitments and values and seeking their own personal values, choices, and directions. Tremendous energy is expended in establishing, maintaining, severing, and restoring ties and relationships at home and at school. All of these concerns and struggles, so relevant to the developing self-esteem of the individual, are going on within a physical body which is also changing shape.

For young people who have been identified as gifted, these struggles and issues are just as significant as they are for all young people. In fact, it may be argued that gifted young people experience more stress and strain as they try to work their way through, and analyze their feelings and reactions. Many may try to use their brains to assess and evaluate what is happening to them, and to internalize and reflect upon themselves and their conflicts. Young gifted learners need at least as much nurturing as other students.

LITERATURE: A VALUABLE RESOURCE

On Common Ground is important to gifted young learners because it is a curriculum which focusses on narratives of human experience. Stories have the power to generate reflection about the human experience. They encourage young learners to experience, observe, listen, read, reflect, and express their ideas. The heart of the book is stories about people in different circumstances. The table of contents, listing all the titles of the literature, appears in Appendix A.

These stories are presented as springboards to understanding the human soul. Young people may learn not only from personal experience, but

also by immersing themselves in literature. For young people who are searching for values and role-models, the stories of other people's crises, traumas, observations, and insights, can be inspiring. Narratives provide common ground for students to discuss and share experiences. Thus, for young people who are dealing with their own search for values, heroes, and people to respect and admire, stories provide stimuli to their own personal search and discovery of what life is all about. What more important resource could there be for stimulating independent thought and learning?

Another reason for including a strong literature component in any English curriculum is that it focusses the students' attention on reading. Reading, whether alone, in groups, quietly, or aloud, is liberating for the human mind. Gifted children are often good readers. Many already read widely, and often enjoy reading both fiction and non-fiction. To encourage them to use literature as a springboard for discovering their common ground with other people is to assure them that there actually is some common ground. Besides, for gifted young people, reading is sometimes an escape from day to day stresses. No matter what their ultimate career goals, most of these gifted young people plan to go on to university. To continue to encourage personal reading habits and independent reading skills is a valid and legitimate curriculum goal. As well, to stimulate reflection, and writing related to what they are reading and thinking is an excellent opening for teaching many of the skills required in independent thinking.

Adolescence is a time when students should be encouraged to discover who they really are and discover where they fit in the world around them. They can assess their strengths, talents, and needs, and take risks to discover what they are genuinely capable of doing and achieving. An English course is a time for exploring a range of issues, ideas, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, experiences and values. Stories allow for such exploration and reflection. A good curriculum should offer young people opportunities to deal with issues which are universal in nature, and stimulate thought, reflection, argument, evaluation, and perhaps the synthesis of their own positions.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

It is important to introduce the concept of self-assessment early in grade nine. To engage students in self-assessment of their strengths and needs at the beginning of the course or unit is useful. First, it gives them a clear sense of where they are in competence, skill, and confidence as they approach new learning. Secondly, they begin to conceptualize and learn the criteria that lead to success. Thirdly, when a course or unit is completed, self-assessment gives students a sense of how far they have progressed, and helps them to measure their own growth and achievement. Thus, self-assessment can be used diagnostically at the beginning of a unit, formatively throughout, and summatively at the end. Finally, when students are involved in assessing their own learning, they often have a clearer picture, and a more focussed approach to learning. Self-assessment is important to the effectiveness of the teaching, learning, and evaluating taking place. It helps to establish a place to begin, and is a powerful tool throughout the formative and summative stages of learning.

What follows is a description of an approach to take which leads students towards increased independence in learning. All students may begin at the same place, but they may end up with very different products. The key is to build opportunities for choice and self-direction into the programme .

On Common Ground allows students the opportunity to learn the skills of self-assessment which are at the heart of independent learning. In fact, how can learning be truly independent unless there is a strong focus on self-assessment and evaluation of both the process and the products of learning?

Each unit integrates diagnostic and formative assessment and summative evaluation within the three stages of the curriculum. DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT takes place at the beginning of a new unit or course. Its purpose is to determine what the student already knows or does not know and can or cannot do. It serves to focus the learner's attention on his or her strengths and needs and helps the teacher and student set goals for a particular unit or time period. Strategies for diagnostic assessment are questionnaires, surveys, pre-tests and discussions. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT involves observing the student over a period of time, and providing feedback to the student about his or her progress and achievements. Strategies for formative assessment include observations, conferences, interviews, curriculum activities and projects. All the work that a student does in a unit, whether oral, written or a media project, is an opportunity for formative assessment. SUMMATIVE EVALUATION usually takes place at the end of learning. Summative evaluation , the opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned in the unit or course, involves marks and grades, and is usually determined by tests, exams, or end-of unit activities, essays, and projects. The results of summative evaluation are reported to parents, students, and other teachers.

At the beginning of each unit, students are encouraged to assess or diagnose their attitudes, strengths, needs, and learning styles. Learners reflect on and record their assessments, and set personal learning goals. One important self-assessment strategy which is emphasized is the use of the visual target. Students are taught how to use a visual target as a means of assessing their strengths and needs and demonstrating where they are at the beginning of the course or unit, and where they are at the end.

A detailed explanation of the target concept follows below. The concept, once understood, is adaptable for self, peer, or teacher assessment and evaluation either of the whole curriculum, one area within the curriculum, or one activity. The target strategy helps students to see and understand their strengths and needs. The targets are a good way to initiate reflection in learning logs.

THE TARGET APPROACH

One effective strategy for diagnostic or formative assessment is the target approach outlined in the following pages. The target provides an interesting starting point for conferences and interviews focussing on assessment and evaluation. It not only involves students in a very clear awareness of the criteria for evaluation, but also helps to communicate to students and their parents the skills, attitudes, and behaviours to be developed throughout the unit or course.

The purpose of the first self-assessment target is to determine where students see themselves at the beginning of the course, or unit. Whether their assessments are accurate or not will show as the unit develops. Either way, it is interesting and useful information. It engenders good group discussion about evaluation criteria and serves as an effective opening point for individual interviews and conferences.

It is best to leave numbers, marks, and percentages off the target when it is being used for diagnostic and formative assessment. However, eventually, the target can also be used summatively, as a useful indicator of measuring progress and achievement.

The target concept is flexible enough to be adapted to an assessment of the whole curriculum, or to one specific area of the curriculum. In fact, it can be used as a strategy for focussing on only one or two criteria within an area. Finally, it may also be used to evaluate a particular product.

This visual and metaphoric approach has proved appealing to students. The target encourages students to share and discuss criteria necessary for success, and to negotiate the value of each criteria with the teacher. Its visual representation presents all of the expected criteria, and their proportionate value in a pie-chart format. Five circles are overlaid on the pie chart, in order to create a bull's eye, a concept familiar to students.
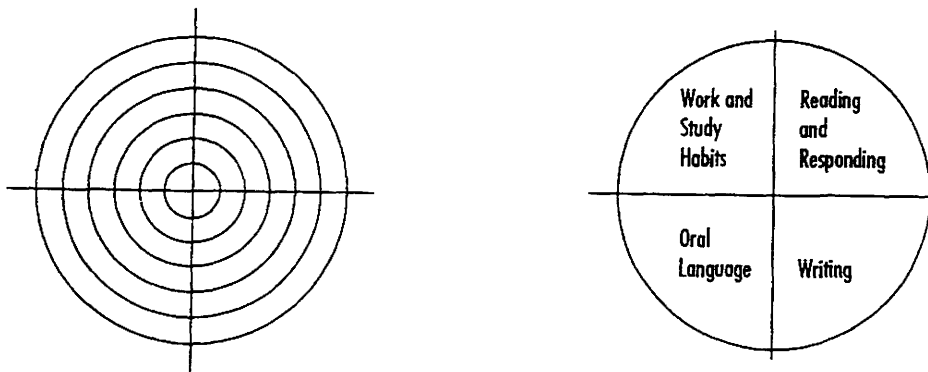
Because the visual target is flexible and can be adapted for use with individuals or small groups, this approach is very helpful in a de-streamed class, with students of varied ability, interest, and skill. Depending on the strengths and needs of the individual student or group, you may wish to focus on only one goal at a time. For some, it may be too overwhelming to attend simultaneously to all areas of the English curriculum. If so, select only one area at a time on which individual students, groups of students, or a whole class might work. Below, you will find suggested criteria for each area of the English curriculum.

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT: THE TARGET APPROACH

The steps below outline a process for teaching students how to assess and evaluate their confidence and competence with all four areas of the English curriculum. Later, examples of using the target for one specific area are also provided.

The first step is to teach students what will be evaluated in the curriculum unit. In most English courses, evaluation is based on a variety of criteria, most of which can be fit into the following four categories or headings:

WORK AND STUDY HABITS (preparing to learn)

ORAL LANGUAGE(speaking, listening, presenting)

WRITING (for a variety of audiences and purposes)

READING AND RESPONDING (to a variety of texts)

Draw a large circle on the board, then divide it into four quarters. Label each quarter with one of the four headings suggested above. Explain to students that the circle, or pie chart, represents the whole picture of all that is taught and learned in an English programme. Each piece of the pie represents the mark or percentage value to be given for that particular area of the curriculum. Students are often surprised to learn how their mark will be determined.

At this point, it is interesting to ask whether each of the four areas, or categories, should always be valued equally. Such a question often generates interesting discussion about evaluation criteria. As a class, you may want to negotiate a somewhat different mark ratio for each area.

Once students have a sense of the value of all four areas, it is interesting to try to define what is to be included within each category. One way to do this is to assign groups of students the task of defining what is to be included. Have them consider their past experiences in English classes, and then attempt to determine what criteria seem to be most important for success in each area. On the following pages, you will find examples of what other students have come up with.

Students report back to the class, sharing their ideas about the criteria which their group considers essential in each area. Eventually, after some debate, argument, further input and direction from you, the class will develop a sense of the criteria expected for success under each heading listed. Once they have gained that sense, show them how the pie chart can be adapted into a target, and used not only to record the areas, but also to diagnose their own level of confidence and skill in each area.

To create an evaluation target right on the pie chart, simply overlay concentric circles on the pie chart. For example, if you wanted six levels of achievement to be represented, place five concentric circles on the pie chart. Students who are familiar with the concept of a "bull's eye" know that the highest level is at the center. The placement furthest away from the center represents the lowest level of confidence, competence, and achievement.

a)   b)
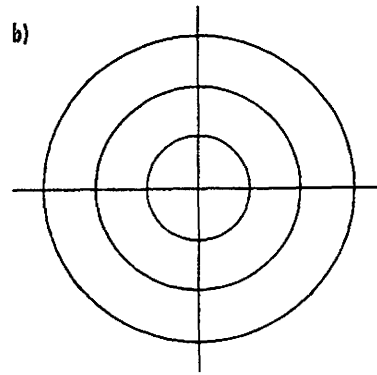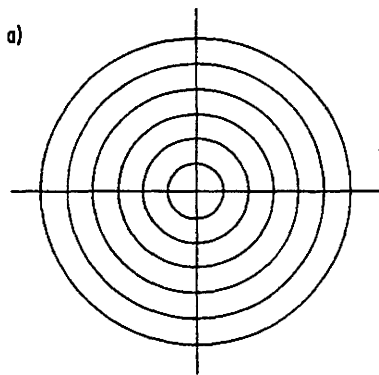
A SPORTS ANALOGY

The use of a sports analogy may help students understand the concept. During field testing, teachers have suggested the following analogy of a hockey game in an arena. The centre circle represents the area closest to the goal. Like a player who is in control of the puck, and moving confidently towards the goal, the student feels confident and capable. This may be termed a "SUPERIOR" level of achievement, an "A" grade, level six. The second circle is like the area near the blue line, where the player is perhaps moving towards the goal, but has not yet arrived. He or she is focussed on the goal, but still has a long way to go. This may be termed "proficient", a "B" grade, level five. The third circle is like the center ice area, where the player may or may not be in control of the situation, and may, in fact, lose the puck. As most hockey players and fans know, it's difficult to get a goal from centre ice. The player really has to keep working and digging, as an individual and as a member of a team, focussing on achieving the eventual goal. With effort and discipline, this person can become quite competent, a "C" grade, level four

The fourth circle is like a hockey player behind the action. For this player, a goal seems like an impossible task. This player is on the ice, and wants to play, but can't seem to get close to the puck, and lacks the confidence to get to the heart of the action. With a lot of coaching, encouragement, and effort, this person can progress at an adequate pace, a "D" grade, level three The fifth circle from the centre represents those students who are just beginning to warm up for the game. They are there, willing to play, but lack both the confidence and skill. These players , before entering the game alongside the others, will likely need extra coaching and extra practice in some of the basic skills. The achievement may be defined as limited, an "E" grade, level two. Level one is represented on the farthest circle from the centre, the outside circle. These players may be on the team, but they are not playing the game. They are either absent too much, or they are limited in what they can achieve. Many survive only with a real commitment to turning their attitudes and behaviours around. They require significant coaching and guidance, perhaps even 1=1. Although their achievements seem limited, they depend upon excellent teachers in the subject area and in the Special

Education department to support them and keep them in the game. The key to success is a supportive teacher who nurtures self-esteem and develops confidence, inspires effort and provides the extra practice and drill necessary to bring the student up to level. Without such a teacher and learning environment, such a student would remain at a dependent level, an "F" grade.

Once the class has understood the target concept, and the levels of confidence and competence being represented on the bull's eye, students do an initial self-assessment of their apparent level of confidence and competence in each area, before beginning the new unit. They record their assessments as follows:

To work with six levels on the target, it is useful to number each circle, with #6 at the centre, then #5, #4, etc until the outer circle which is #1.
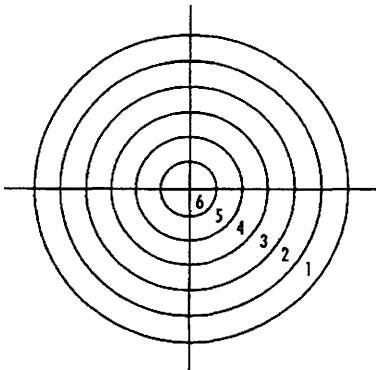
CENTRE CIRCLE (LEVEL SIX), SUPERIOR, "A"

Students who feel very confident, skilled, capable, and competent all of the time in a given area will colour in the smallest, center circle. This bull's eye circle represents those students who feel they excel in this particular area and will have no trouble meeting established goals.

NEXT TO CENTRE (LEVEL FIVE), PROFICIENT, "B"

Students who feel a certain amount of confidence in their skills, and ability most of the time will fill in the next circle. They recognize that they do not excel in this area, but they do not consider it a major problem or weakness, and they will eventually achieve established goals .

CIRCLE #4 (LEVEL FOUR), COMPETENT,"C"

Students who feel they sometimes show the characteristic behaviours, skill, or ability associated with a particular area would indicate this by colouring in the third circle. This may indicate either a lack of self-confidence or a lack of skill. These students feel that they will meet established goals in this area if they attend regularly, work hard, and get help when they need it, either from the subject teacher, friends, or a peer counsellor or tutor.

CIRCLE #3 (LEVEL THREE), ADEQUATE, "D"

Still other students who feel less confidence, and who seldom display the characteristic behaviours would put checkmarks or initials in the outer circle. Such an assessment would indicate either a lack of skill or confidence. Such students feel that they will meet the expected criteria only with significant support and tutoring from the subject teacher.

CIRCLE #2 (LEVEL TWO), LIMITED, "E"

These students lack both confidence and skill. They have experienced failure often. It s unlikely that they will meet the expected criteria without significant involvement and modification of programme by a nurturing and supportive subject teacher. With a lot of effort, and with extra practice, time, and attention, these students will improve their low standing. They may

require the intervention and support of a special education teacher who can modify programme, and provide support.

CIRCLE #1 (LEVEL ONE), DEPENDENT, "F"

These students have experienced so much failure that they probably have negative attitudes towards themselves, the subject, and the teacher. Many likely have poor attendance patterns because it's easier to avoid expectations than to meet them. It's important for someone, either the classroom teacher, guidance counsellor, or special education teacher, to try to reach out to these students. It is interesting to interview these students to determine where they feel their learning problems lie: lack of confidence, skill, and experience, poor attendance, attitude, or work habits, or inability to focus attention on school because of personal or family pressures. With such students, it is also important to determine how well or how poorly they read. Many students hide the fact that they cannot read under layers of defensive attitudes and behaviours.

In conclusion, these initial self-assessments provide a good starting place for learning and give some insight into how students see themselves. Use the information gained from the assessment target as an opener for student-teacher and parent conferences.

STAGE ONE: ASSESSING LEARNING BACKGROUND

The purpose of this stage is to assess the attitudes, prior experiences, and background knowledge of the students before they begin to read the new story to follow. It begins to focus the student's attention on the ideas, themes, conflicts, concepts, to be found in the stories. This section allows students time to "tune in", generates interest, and helps students to focus on the ideas of the unit or of the individual story. Pre-reading activities engage the individual in reading, and may involve the whole class in constructive talk and sharing of experiences. Sample introductory activities follow below.

(A)   SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INTRODUCING A UNIT:
Read each of the following statements. On a scale of 1-5, indicate whether you strongly agree (5), agree (4), have no opinion (3), disagree (2), or strongly disagree (1).

1.   It is important to feel good about yourself.
2.   Other people judge you only on the outside.
3.   Appearances can be deceiving.
4.   Advertising appeals to our insecurities about our inner selves.
5.   The physical changes in the body can have a significant impact on the psychological state of the individual.
6.   How you feel about yourself is reflected in your appearance and clothes.

B)   OTHER AVENUES OF APPROACH
With a partner or small group, discuss your responses to the questions that follow.
1.   Have you ever heard people wishing:
       they were different?
       they were someone else?
       they could be understood?
       they could communicate better?
       they could be accepted for who they are?

2.   List five ways to say that someone is unique.

3. What do you think makes someone confident in your own sex? in the opposite sex? in someone your own age? in an adult?

4. It seems to be a risky subject to talk about the emotional state of young people Why? What is at the root of the discomfort?

C) OTHER ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE

1. Draw or cut pictures out of magazines to make a collage of people who seem to be perfectly happy with themselves.

2   Provide examples of people who appear to be beautiful on the outside but are not as beautiful in spirit. Then, provide examples of people who may not appear beautiful but have a beautiful spirit.

3   Discuss how a person's sense of self can lead to difficulty within a family, school, or group of friends.

STAGE TWO: WORKING TOWARDS AND ASSESSING GROWTH

The unit materials and resources provide varied speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and presenting activities. These activities allow students and teachers to observe and assess formatively the students' growing proficiency. Students use learning logs to reflect upon their learning. Learning logs encourage students to reflect on and record their own internal dialogue. They also become more aware of themselves as learners, assessing their progress towards the goals established. Get students involved in writing a learning log. A learning log is an opportunity for students to think about and reflect upon their learning, and perhaps to consider changes or plans. It is similar to journal writing, but one which is specifically focussed on assessing their learning.

Use the initial self-assessment target as a stimulus to the first learning log. Encourage students to reflect on their reasons for evaluating themselves as they did. Get them to think not only about where they are today but also where they want to be at the end of the first unit, term, or semester. Have students do a learning log every week or two. Students may want to complete a

new target along with their entry, or look back on the first one. One type of learning log is a letter to the teacher or to themselves, in which they talk about their learning and how they feel about it. The idea of a letter is appealing because it gives the writer a sense of audience.

The targets and accompanying reflective journal writing may be stored in a folder or portfolio for re-examination. As the folder develops, it becomes a very useful tool for conferences with the teacher, student, parent, or other people interested in getting feedback on student progress. To focus their thinking and writing, students respond to questions such as those that follow.

a) Consider your skill and competence levels on your first self-assessment? How have they changed since the course began?

b) What goal did you set for yourself in this time period?
Do you feel that you achieved that goal? Why?

c) What learning experiences and opportunities contributed to your making progress?

d) What hindered your progress? What obstacles got in the way? How did you deal with them?

e) What do you propose to do differently from now on?

Teachers can also read to and with the students, and involve the students in keeping a reading response journal as they read. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their encounters with the stories, and to share their response in a variety of ways. They need time to explore what they want to express about the story and how they will creatively express that response. As students encounter the story (by reading, listening, or viewing) they record their thoughts, feelings, ideas, questions, reactions, and connections they make to other stories, other characters, and other experiences. Response journals can be shared with the teacher, partner, small group, or class. The questions and prompts such below are useful for initiating response journals:

I think..
I wonder...
This story makes me remember...
Reading this makes me think of...

This seems a lot like...
I don't understand...
It seems wrong that...
It seems funny that...
What is going to happen next?
If I were in that situation,....
Why didn't the character try to...
I don't like this character because...
I like this story because...
The problem in this story is...
I'd solve the problem by...
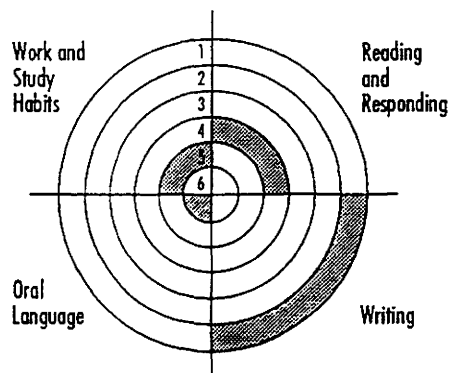
STAGE THREE: SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Summative evaluation allows teachers and students to evaluate what has been learned and achieved. Students may produce a project which demonstrates their responses to the literature in the unit. The process may involve planning, making decisions, selecting resources, considering possibilities, managing time, recording progress, working with others, getting the job done, and evaluating the process, product, and learning. Students' work habits, self-discipline, ability to work with others, and use of time and resources can all be assessed by teacher, peer and self.

The target can also be a useful indicator of achievement. The simplest way to generate a mark using the target is to consider the whole target to be worth 100%. If there are four segments of equal size indicated on the target, each would be worth 25 marks. Each of the six levels represents a portion of those 25 marks, as follows: Level six, at the centre would be worth an "A", 25 marks out of 25. Level five would be worth a "B", 20 marks. Level four, "C", is worth 5 marks. Level three,"D", is 10 marks. Level two, "E", is 5 marks. Level One, F", the outer circle, is worth 0 marks.

graphic (above)

For example, a student may be at level six ("A") in oral language, level five("B") in work habits, level one ("F") in writing, and level four ("C") in reading. This student would thus earn an approximate mark of 25 +20 +0+15 =60. If such a student wanted to earn a higher mark, he or she would have to do significantly better in the area of writing.

SAMPLE EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

1. At the beginning of this unit, you held certain opinions about how young people see themselves Write a one-page entry in your reading response log. Evaluate how some of your ideas, opinions, and attitudes may have changed as a result of reading the stories in the unit.

2. Imagine that you are a counsellor giving advice to any characters from the stories in the unit. Encourage them to reflect on who they really are. Do this in writing, or speak in role as the counsellor who wants your client to be more comfortable with his or her inner self.

3.Write a letter from any character in this unit to any other character. In that letter, have the writer complain about how he appears very differently to the outside world from how he views himself on the inside. Speak in his or her voice. Answer the letter in the voice of the person receiving it. Convince the letter-writer that those feelings are very common to young people.

4. Select one problem that re-appears several times in the unit. For three stories, identify specifically what the problem is, why it is a problem, and what each of them should have done to solve the problem.

5. Imagine that two characters from this unit meet. What kinds of things would they talk about? Compose a dialogue in which they talk to each other. Try to capture their personalities, concerns, mannerisms and expressions.

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES COURSE

The Interdisciplinary Studies Course at T.A. Blakelock High School in Oakville has been running for ten years. When first initiated, its purpose was to present opportunities for enrichment across-the-curriculum, using Renzulli's enrichment Triad model as a basis. The goal of the programme was to provide gifted learners with an opportunity to meet with people of like minds and to research topics of personal interest--a kind of learners' club, as Frank Smith put it in his powerful book Insult to Intelligence (1986) In introducing his concept, Smith says:

> Learning is the brain's primary function, its constant
> concern, and we become restless and frustrated if there is
> no learning to be done. We are all capable of huge and
> unsuspected learning accomplishments without effort. [20]

Initially, the focus of the Interdisciplinary Studies course was definitely on the intellectual growth of the learners. With the first teacher who had the programme for four years, this goal was maintained. The second teacher brought a different flavour. Because he saw many of the students' needs as affective and social, he worked towards social/emotional growth and confidence building. He got students talking more and working together in groups in order to learn how to get along. He felt that many of the students were potential leaders, but they had not had experiences with leadership. His own personality was very outgoing, and his manner was very engaging and invitational. Students enjoyed the course because they liked the teacher and enjoyed what he got them involved in.

I was the third teacher to teach the course; the previous teacher had begun to feel frustrated. He felt that he had been working very hard, and questioned how much the students were willing to work and put in the effort required to make progress. Students wanted only the interesting oral and

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[20] Frank Smith, Insult to Intelligence, p. 18

group activities; they weren't very interested in improving their written language or research skills. Many didn't take timelines and time-management seriously. As well, their emotional needs had become taxing at times. He felt "burnt out".

The first step was to acquaint likely candidates with the information about the course. Traditionally, the course was open by invitation only. I had a vested interest in getting enough students involved because I felt strongly that this type of course would be very valuable to bright young people. I also felt it would be a great challenge and a lot of fun to teach. Students who were either identified gifted or achieving an "A" average in grade nine and ten courses were invited by personal letter and follow-up interview.

That year, when thirty-two (32) students selected the Interdisciplinary Studies Course, the administration made the decision to run two classes, one each semester. Over the summer, I planned all sorts of ideas and gathered resources, but I knew that I had to wait to meet the students before I could do any definitive planning beyond establishing the three stages of curriculum: Assessing Learning Background, Working Towards and Assessing Growth, and Summative Evaluation.

STAGE ONE: ASSESSING LEARNING BACKGROUND

The first day was spent in learning names and trying to determine why people had taken the course. Students were asked the same questions as those mentioned earlier with the OAC class:

Why did you choose this course?
What do you hope to get out of it?
What do you really want to learn?
What are your goals? What are you willing to do to achieve them?
What can I do to help?

Students seemed surprised by these questions. In fact, one student informed me that I seemed to have everything backwards. I was the teacher. I

should be handing out a one-page course outline, listing all the topics they would be learning. This type of outline is very typical of a curriculum that is planned ahead of time, and states clear objectives, learning activities, resources, timelines and evaluation. I responded by sharing my belief that they would be in charge of the learning. It was my job to coach, to guide from the side, to encourage them and to establish a climate in which their growth and achievements would be valued. By the end of the first period together, we had ascertained general curriculum goals. These were presented visually on a pie chart, similar to the one below.

Students wanted to: have fun, try something different,
            have a change of pace, do a lot of group work
            develop confidence in speaking publically
            research topics of personal interest
            understand people and themselves.
I agreed with them, but I also wanted them to:
            develop their thinking skills,
            expand their personal vocabularies,
            develop their writing skills, and
            expand their general knowledge.
I negotiated these goals because I had experience, resources, and confidence in those areas. It was important for me to have an initial comfort level.

On the second day, we debated the value to be attributed to each of these ten areas, and decided they should be weighed equally at 10% each. From that point on, everything we did fit into one of those categories. Actually, many of the activities overlapped several areas, but it was useful to have a framework for assessment and evaluation.

STAGE TWO: WORKING TOWARDS AND ASSESSING GROWTH

The first time I taught the course, my zeal to establish an open, invitational climate was positive; however, I made mistakes. A classroom climate in which the teacher is attempting to play a less traditional role can be very stressful. One student had an aggressive and manipulative personality.

She tended to dominate conversations and occasionally got embroiled in controversy. At times, it was tempting to revert to a more traditional role of teacher as authority to calm things down. As well, I had not anticipated the significant emotional needs of some of these young people. One girl had just lost her mother, a fact that emerged poignantly in a discussion about families one day. Another was in the throes of a messy divorce at home. Two others discovered each other and fell madly in love. It was difficult to keep a focus on learning!

However, there were also things that went well. For example, we planned an overnight, two-day field trip to Crieff Hills, a Presbyterian church retreat. There, outside the confines of the school, many good things happened. We got to know each other. We walked for miles in the woods, reflected on autumn leaves, clouds, corn fields, the loss of family farms, and the stuff of memories. The students played child-like games: Tag, Capture-the-Flag, Scrabble, Charades, and Pictionary. As they cooked meals and washed and cleaned together, they talked, listened to, and learned about one another.

It was a very relaxing time, and yet it was tense too. The place was so calming that many of the students let down the defences they so often use. By the time we were all tucked into bed that night, many tears were flowing. Something was being unleashed in many of the students. For some, it was the rediscovery of the wonder of the myriad of stars. For others, it was the outdoor chapel, a place for reflection, prayer and quiet thought, or the evening campfire and the memories it provoked. For others, the long hikes in the colourful woods, and the opportunities to sit on logs and "smell the roses" while afternoon light filtered through the trees brought out something spiritual.

When we returned to the school, some of those emotions still were close to the surface. It was difficult to re-establish classroom structures. By the time two weeks had gone by, I found myself exhausted by all the emotion the students displayed. The only wise move was to retreat for a while to a more traditional, teacher-centred role in which I could count on the structures of the situation to re-establish some normality.

STAGE THREE: SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

With the support of the teacher-librarian, I got the students heavily involved in intellectual pursuits. They had to complete three projects: research on a person, a place and a thing. Some of them resented my placing a tight structure on them after encouraging them to be free thinkers; however, I needed to re-establish some sense of order and progress. I evaluated their work on the projects and used the marks and summative evaluation as a means of restoring a more traditional focus to the course.

At the end of my first experience, I evaluated myself very negatively. I felt that I hadn't been able to put onto practice what I believed in. Then, I realized that it was too soon to judge. Inevitably, in attempting a new way of teaching after using traditional methods successfully, I would experience a level of discomfort. The next time, I could build on my failures and successes.

The second time I taught the course, I didn't want to make the same mistakes. I was determined to establish a more sensible balance of the cognitive and affective domains. It would always be easier to let go gradually and to move towards self-direction. However, I need not have worried. The second group was entirely different. By nature, they seemed more affable and more collegial. Unlike the first group, there were no prima donnas. Everyone wanted to have fun together, but they were more willing to work towards achieving both individual and group goals. However, I did institute three changes which provided an added structure to the course: the use of journal-writing, the acquisition of vocabulary, and the use of guest speakers.

We started off with the same process of establishing goals. Ironically, many of the goals were identical to those selected by the first group. This time, however, I moved the students immediately into self-assessment of where they were now and where they wanted to be in five months. When the department head provided a budget, I bought three things for each student: a journal, a ball-point pen, and a vocabulary workbook. We negotiated that students were to submit fifty pages of personal and reflective journal writing per month. Feedback would be given about their thoughts, ideas, feelings, questions, and

observations. This use of personal journal- writing allowed them to express ideas and emotions, and to communicate with me, but with the possibility of remaining private. Students soon moved away from talking about all the events in their lives, and used the journals more for reflecting on those events. By reading their journals, I gained insight into their thoughts, ideas, and feelings, but I had time to think before responding.

Besides the journals, we structured two half-periods a week for vocabulary study together. The vocabulary was useful because it provided a common ground and a structure to the programme. Students enjoyed a sense of camaraderie as they struggled with and mastered new words. They felt knowledgeable and intelligent when they learned Latin and Greek prefixes, roots and suffixes. As well, vocabulary study led easily into skits, drama and improvisations, creative use of language, speech-making and debate.

The third major change to the curriculum was to invite in guest teachers. The first was interested in world geography and international affairs. He introduced students to world maps. Students were challenged to memorize all the countries of the world. This necessitated teaching some memorizing strategies such as mnemonics. The unit climaxed with a debate on an international issue. His approach was far more methodical than my own. The students benefitted from the tight structure, but they admitted that they missed the climate we had created together.

The second guest teacher taught a mini-course in human relationships, conflict resolution, and peer counselling. From their journals, I had realized that many of these students were already interested and involved in these field. They were already advising their friends about divorce, suicide, relationships, anger, love and frustration, yet they lacked a theoretical understanding of what peer counselling was all about. This part of the course was very successful. The students loved the interaction, discussion, group activities and the roleplay involved in the course. Many felt they had really benefitted from the experience.

Thus, these three significant changes: focussing on journal-writing, using vocabulary as a stimulus to growth, and using guest speakers in diverse areas, provided a wider and deeper range of experiences for the learners.

By the time I had taught the course for the third and fourth times, I continued to modify the curriculum based on assessed strengths and needs of the students. For example, in the last two years, I have moved into having students do a lot more presenting and teaching of concepts. The course has evolved into a more definable pattern. The first stage, Assessing learning Background focusses on the individual learner, and includes such activities as goal-setting, journal-writing, interviews, autobiographies, and assessing learning styles. The role of the teacher is critical, in establishing a healthy and positive climate in which students are willing to take risks. It is also an important role to help them assess their strengths and needs, and to set achievable goals. The second stage, Working Towards Growth and Achievement provides the students with a framework for researching people and places. Students must research a character of their choice, and they are exposed to world issues and world maps. In this stage, although the students select their own topics, the expectations and assignments are clearly established for everyone. The teacher plays an important role of guide, providing a lot of formative feedback and encouragement. In the final stage, Summative Evaluation, students are given a freer reign to demonstrate what they have learned about learning independently. First, they select a topic for independent research and develop their own plan for working through a process to a final product. As well, they demonstrate what they have learned in terms of presenting skills by teaching a lesson to the rest of the class. Throughout this final stage, I play the role of coach and guide.

Student comments recorded during a discussion on the value of the Interdisciplinary course provide further insights on the effectiveness of the programme. These comments follow.

"It was different from other courses, a nice change
not to be directed by teachers."

"We had to get through things on our own."

"At first, I felt nervous and insecure because I couldn't figure out what the teacher wanted. Then I learned to overcome my fears by just going ahead and trusting my instincts."

"I liked the freedom of selecting projects we were interested in. It made me work harder and I had to learn how to manage my own time."

'I learned to strive for something for my own sake, not just to please a teacher."

"I liked the World Studies unit because I learned so much. I had no idea how ignorant I was of other countries."

"I feel more confident now. I'm not afraid of speaking in front of the class."

"I really liked learning about the different intelligences and learning styles. I understand myself a lot more now. When I have to study for other courses, I have new ways to do it."

"I liked the relaxed atmosphere of working together. It was good to get to know other people and I really appreciated having a teacher who knew and understood what made me tick."

Thus, the Interdisciplinary studies Course at T.A. Blakelock High School has been a positive learning experience not only for the students but also for myself. Like the OAC English program, and the work on On Common Ground, this course gave me the opportunity to try some new strategies and approaches, to take some risks, and to effect some changes.

CHAPTER FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Chapter three narrated the highlights of my experiences in coaching gifted adolescents towards independence in learning. The three narratives provided information about using a three-stage model of curriculum. This chapter makes some practical suggestions for you to consider in implementing such a curriculum in your own situation. My own and my students' experiences in using this model, and the common ground discovered in all three narratives, form the basis of the recommendations being made.

FACILITIES AND RESOURCES

In order to allow for increased movement and noise, you will need access to areas in the school which allow for some of the following: presentations and drama, conferencing and interviewing, quiet study, and classroom debates. It would be best to establish some distance from more traditional, teacher-centred classrooms. It's also useful to be situated close to the resource centre.

Taking the students out of the school is highly recommended. A conservation area or retreat which allows for relaxing, walking, hiking, playing games, and drama is excellent. If you can arrange an overnight field trip as a retreat from the school environment, you will find there are many opportunities for personal and interpersonal reflection, enjoyment of nature, personal conversations and interviews with teacher and student. As well, an overnight trip provides excellent opportunities for students to work together in teams to plan, cook, and prepare meals. In a setting removed from the pressures of school, many students relax and talk about their lives, stresses, pressures, dreams, fears, ambitions, strengths, needs and goals.

Because the course is active and involves a lot of choice, it's good to have the following resources available: a dictionary, thesaurus, atlas, and world globe, newspapers, current magazines, scissors, pens and coloured markers, art supplies, television, VCR, and a video camera. It's wise to have every student buy a journal for personal writing.

Access to good research facilities is essential, whether they be in a school or public library. Human resources, mentors and advisors are also very important. If an instructional aide is available, that person can play a key role in helping to guide and counsel students. In order to work towards autonomous learning, it is essential that students have more than one adult to turn to. The second person plays an important role in providing different perspectives, experiences, and opinions. As well, this person can work with and monitor small groups of students in a variety of settings. It's best if this instructional aide is of a different gender, age, or race than the teacher. This allows for further diversity of views, perspectives, biases, and experiences.

ENVIRONMENT

The classroom environment should represent a change of pace from regular classrooms. It should be relaxed, but focussed on learning to learn. Create an environment which encourages self-assessment, creative and critical thinking, respect, tolerance, empathy and understanding for themselves and for others around them. Gifted programmes are sometimes accused of being elitist, teaching attitudes of superiority. If you encourage young people to be aware of their own talents and their own needs, and to search for the talents and needs of others, you will do them a great service. Criteria for selection of pupils who are most likely to do well in such a curriculum include: academic ability, varied skills and talents, wide interests, self-direction, self-discipline, and awareness of strengths and needs.

PARENTS AND TEACHERS AS PARTNERS

Gaining the support of parents is important to the success of the programme. The most important way to gain their support is to provide a programme in which their children are happy and excited about learning and sharing what they are doing. Provide parents with summaries of reading or professional development sessions related to giftedness and autonomous learning. Call parents to invite them to provide additional background information. Encourage them to become partners in the education of their children. Invite them to be volunteers, mentors, visitors or guest speakers

Write reports that are detailed and useful. Focus on the observed strengths and apparent needs of the student, and make specific statements about goals. It's important that the parent understand the written information on the student profile. If it is educational jargon that makes no sense to the uninitiated, then the parent should ask that the information be recorded in common sense statements. Parents of the gifted are often very aware of their child's strengths and needs and should be able to determine whether or not the placement and the programme being offered actually meets the child's needs. Parents and teacher should be in touch throughout the year so there are no surprises at the annual review.

The parent is a valuable participant and has been a valued and significant observer of that child. If the child has a difficult time assessing his or her own goals, strengths and weaknesses, the parent might be able to provide some valuable information, a missing piece of the puzzle. It's very worthwhile for parents and teachers to get together at parents' night interviews, open houses, class visits or field trip volunteering. These opportunities, as well as phone calls, can be very valuable times to share observations and help the students to establish some goals or get on track.

When parents and teachers criticize each other and question what each other is doing, the child usually loses a sense of direction. When students see that parents and teachers respect each other's opinions and observations, they are more likely to stay focussed.

TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS

A teacher who is making a change and trying to develop a course in independent learning is taking a risk. That teacher needs to have a clear sense of what he or she values, and must be committed to the image of the learner being intimately involved in curriculum and programme choices. As well, the teacher needs to be able to assess where students are, and to help them determine where they want to and need to go. The teacher must be confident enough to let the learners learn. This type of programme requires a teacher who is willing to "let go" of the control over the curriculum and the

learning. This teacher puts increased energy into creating a classroom climate which is conducive to learner-centred learning. In such a programme, the teacher does not abdicate responsibility for what happens in the classroom. Instead, he or she re-defines the teaching role. Rather than being a transmitter of information, or even a transactional guide, this teacher must take on the very active role of coaching and transforming learners.

Teachers who are interested in independent learning will likely have to assess their abilities and talents in a number of these areas: Subject matter, Interests, Leadership, Organization, Assessment and Evaluation Strategies and Knowledge of curriculum design and development

A teacher who has a deep understanding of independent learning and the nature of giftedness will be a good candidate. This type of programme requires genuine commitment by excellent, well-qualified and enthusiastic teachers. In order to coach a team of students towards more autonomous learning, a teacher must encourage an excitement about learning, a thirst for knowledge, curiosity, and a desire to ask questions and find answers. The course will be successful only when the students sense that learning, research, self-assessment, discovery and insights are truly valued.

As well, the teacher should have the confidence, experience, and communication skills to speak to students, parents and other staff. Students are sometimes so focussed on acquiring the requisite number of subjects in the least amount of time (fast-tracking) that they don't want to take a course which seems off the beaten track. They need to be convinced of the need for a course on learning to learn. Students who are reflective in nature and who are ready for something different are usually enthusiastic and thankful for the opportunity--but it does require some selling. Secondly, the teacher often has to explain the nature of the course to parents. They need to be convinced that a course which has self-assessment, self-direction, and increased independence and autonomy as its primary goals, will be relevant to their children's learning and life-long needs. Thirdly, when subjects and

departments are battling for class sections to be allocated, the teacher may have to justify the course to other teachers and department heads who believe pupils would be better off with more math, business, or technical courses. Thus, strong communication skills are essential. The better the person's communication skills, and the more effectively he or she can synthesize and explain the goals of the programme, the more likely it will be that the programme is considered credible.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

A curriculum which has Independent Learning as its goal presents many opportunities for students to work both independently and interdependently. For some teachers, this emphasis on students making independent choices is positive. Other teachers may find the classroom somewhat chaotic and active. The suggestions below will help to define the role of the teacher.

Read aloud to the students. Many narratives come to life when they are read aloud. Find other stories with similar characters, conflicts, and themes. Encourage students to read widely and to find similar narratives of human experience. Select and show films, videos, and cartoons that support the students' understanding of what they are reading.

Evaluate frequently. Monitor and record student progress. Give students a lot of formative feedback, telling them what they are doing right and showing them how to improve. Make observations about learning style, work and study habits, and good combinations of partners and groups. Use the information when making decisions about instruction and programme. Involve students in both peer and self-assessment.

Teach focussed concentrated mini-lessons on topics which are needed by the whole class or small groups of students. With the lesson fresh in their minds, they should be able to get on with what they need to do.

Read their Reading Response Logs and Journals. Respond a lot in writing. Students often appreciate personal notes, questions, or comments.

Interview students, either individually or in small groups. Encourage them to reflect on their learning, their strengths and needs. Talk with students about what they are learning and why it is important. Communicate frequently the goals of the programme, and show them how they are progressing towards those goals.

CLASS SIZE

It is important to get the support of the Administration to limit the class size. They are hesitant to run any class with fewer than 16 students. Because of the P.T.R. formula, school-wide, administrators are always cognizant of the effect of having a small number of students in a particular course. Despite the fact that Advanced Level courses can have as many as 28 students in them, it is best for this programme to have anywhere from 16-22 students. That seems to be the critical mass necessary.

Under 16, it can be difficult to generate and maintain enthusiasm; a few students who feel lazy and unproductive can affect everyone else. Another possibility with a small group is that students may tend to bond more closely with the group, and the spirit may likely become more collaborative and less independent.

Over 22 can also be difficult. It is hard to monitor and keep track of all the individual strengths and needs, and be aware of all their different projects and research. The teacher may become overwhelmed by trying to observe, assess, and evaluate all that is going on. It's also difficult to make time for personal interviews and conferences. In order for this focus on autonomous learning to be most effective, it's important for students to feel that the teacher genuinely cares about the individuals and can give the necessary feedback that will promote progress and achievement. With over 22, that kind of individuality and important feedback is less likely.

WINNING THE SUPPORT OF ADMINISTRATION

Invite them in to observe the students in action. Ask them to join the class as participants in debates, presentations, mentors, or chaperones on trips. Share some of the students' writing and projects with the administration. Give them copies of some of the more positive and insightful things students say and write. Read literature and research pertinent to autonomous learning and the gifted. Give copies or prepare abstracts for the administration.

Use the school's resources a great deal and document all usage. For example, log the amount of time students spend in the resource center, studio theatre, or media and computer labs. Involve other staff members in teaching a unit or sharing a particular field of interest and expertise.

Communicate frequently to parents, sharing the goals of the programme and your observations about their student's strengths and needs. Parents who see the benefits of the programme become powerful advocates.

Involve the students in some community (in-school or outside the school) project or service. Make sure the positive aspects of their involvement are publicized positively and reflect well on the school. With the focus on school-based decision-making and on the culture of each school, each principal is very interested in getting all the good press he or she can get.

Share the programme and curriculum with others outside the school. Invite guests in to learn about the programme. Get involved in leading Professional Development Workshops describing your successes and failures.

IN CONCLUSION

In order to experience success in implementing a new curriculum based on Independent Learning, remember that you will feel some discomfort. Believe in your task and try to live the concept. It is not through us that young people learn; it is along with us as models of learners willing to show the way, not just tell it.

Those of us who believe strongly in increased autonomy in learning will define our role as guide, coach or facilitator, not as director. Our role is to create an inviting climate, encourage self-assessment and awareness, and provide activities and resources that encourage growth. We coach students to achieve their potential. When we have designed a curriculum that allows opportunities for student strengths to emerge and needs to be met, we will have done our job.

Thus, classroom climate and curriculum design are at the heart of teaching. Your own experiences as classroom teachers have tremendous power and potential as a rich source of ideas about curriculum design. Our stories put faces and names to concepts about teaching and learning. By reflecting on our past experiences with students and with various curricula, we develop a sense of what it means to be a teacher.

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APPENDIX A

On Common Ground

Contents

The Me You See

On The Inside

Our World

Side by Side