

Retrospectives

Introduction

Educators of the gifted often wonder the effects of gifted programs on the students they have taught. Many educators have been fortunate to have contact through the years with their students.

This section of the Gifted Educators Communicator provides a frame of reference to introduce adults who were gifted students in California's gifted programs and to learn about their stories of being a participant in a gifted program.

A Retrospective by Erika Klein



Over the past holidays, as I was helping my mother-in-law prepare food for a family dinner, I reached into the bowl of hard-boiled eggs waiting to be peeled, picked one up, and spun it on the counter. It was not being spun for fun, but so I could determine whether or not it was fully cooked. This was not a cooking tip learned from any TV show, but instead from a second grade science fair. Twenty-four years later, a simple science project has become a part of my everyday life. To this day, I can still recount the purpose of the science project (to explain Newton's three laws of physics), the evidence (three eggs in various states of "doneness") and the prize (a first place trophy but also a deep love of science and learning).

It is interesting now to look back, and see the impact being marked as "gifted" has had upon my life and the choices I have made – academically, socially, and personally. Like many things in life, the roadmap is best seen and truly appreciated in the rearview mirror. Today, my parents are able to say that among their three children there are four Master's degrees, five undergraduate majors, two minors, two Phi Beta Kappa, seven languages learned and two forgotten, and over fifty countries visited. We were encouraged to become well-rounded citizens of the world, and taught that it did not matter what academic paths or careers we chose, as long as we chose with conviction, and enjoyed what we do. While our parents fostered many of these traits, it could not have been possible without our K-12 teachers.

Among the earliest memories I have of elementary school are of leaving my main classroom, and going to do separate lessons. Starting in third grade, we no longer left the classroom, and I began to notice that my classmates and I were reading different books and doing slightly different lessons. At that age, we knew we were the "GATE" classroom but that was all. It is a testimony to our teachers that while our education was differentiated, on the playground and

in the cafeteria their students did not see any differences. It is only now as an adult that I have come to realize that what I considered everyday classroom events may not necessarily align with the experiences of my peers.

Third grade is full of memories of dictation, books reports, and speeches. Every week, we had a dictation assignment, which involved transcribing a passage being read by our teacher, in handwriting, with all the proper grammar and punctuation marks. At the end of each assignment, we traded with a classmate, and corrected each other's assignment. Several days later, we repeated the exact same passage for a final grade. At the time this seemed to be horrible busywork that made no sense to me. What did it matter that I knew how to mark a paragraph? Why should I be able to hear a passage and be able to accurately transcribe it?



In third grade, we also began to prepare book reports and dioramas. All of our book reports followed the same structure, with an opening paragraph, three paragraphs outlining three main events, and a closing paragraph tying them all together. In addition to presenting written book reports, we all presented a series of speeches during the course of the school year. I do not remember all of the topics, but several still stand out in my memory. Along with presenting a book report, we also had to prepare a demonstration speech, a persuasion speech, and memorize and act out a poem. My parents allowed me to choose (with some guidance) the topic of each speech and worked with me to write and memorize each one.

For our demonstration speech, we had to break down the lesson into individual steps, and teach our classmates something in 10 minutes. I chose to teach how to use chopsticks, a lesson that I still on occasion have used with friends. The poem I picked was "The Tiger" by William Blake. When it was my turn to stand in the front of the classroom, I proudly recited the poem dressed in a homemade head to toe tiger costume.

My memories of elementary school are also full of stories about building a volcano and using baking soda and vinegar to demonstrate the explosion, pulling ash out of our fireplace to recreate a model of the destruction of Pompeii, making a poster about Fr. Junipero Serra, building one of the California missions out of sugar cubes and toothpicks, multiplication tables on mimeographed sheets, and playing kickball with my teachers. But most of all, I remember the books. By second grade, I had discovered the joy of reading books with chapters. By third grade, my parents could not buy enough books to keep up with me. While some children were bribed with candy and toys, my family had a shelf of books that were doled out as rewards. The

only thing that could cure me of biting my nails was a new book for each week that I could show my mother my clean hands.

As early as kindergarten, I remember reading ahead of my classmates in our workbooks. I was not the only student in this situation, and I remember that each of us was allowed to work ahead at our own pace, and sometimes even in different workbooks. One of the few times I was chastised in class was when I was caught reading an extra book under my desk instead of paying attention to the lesson. In later grades my teachers would prepare lists of books we could read for extra credit. These lists were designed for all students in the class, ranging from books at grade level through high school. *Three Musketeers*, *Pride and Prejudice*, I loved them all.

When it was time to go to junior high my parents were forced to decide between sending me to private school, or borrowing an address in another school district. Our elementary school unfortunately fed into a junior high and high school where the sense was I “would not necessarily be challenged academically.” My parents, upon the advice of my teachers, chose to focus on three private, liberal art schools where the curriculum was a blend of academics and arts.

All three schools required group interviews of the prospective students, a prospect which terrified some of my friends to the point of tears. I remember one friend crying hysterically when her mother dropped her off, and not understanding why she was so upset. After all – it was just sitting around telling people why I liked tennis, science, and what my favorite book was. After all the speeches given in class over the years, sitting in a small group with strangers and talking was a piece of cake.

As I look back at these my elementary education, I see the impact it had on my experiences in middle school through college. Beginning in seventh grade, my classrooms shifted more towards seminar/lectures. The ability to simultaneously hear the instructor while transcribing notes is deeply rooted in those dictation exercises. In college, I was able to go back to my written notes to prepare for exams, and by simply rereading them, the information from the entire quarter became refreshed in my memory.

Beginning in middle school the visibility of being “honors” or gifted became more evident. For certain classes, such as Great Books, we had enough students in our grade to make up the whole classroom. For others, you simply moved up and took the course with higher-grade students. I remember being terrified when I had to cross over to the high school campus as an eighth grader taking pre-algebra. Sitting in the corner and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, until I was called on for an answer. Which I knew – and then I knew more answers, and then I learned to speak up in class and stopped worrying about what the older kids thought.

The progression from writing elementary school book reports to five page position papers in junior high and high school was seamless due to the training I received from my teachers. While

other classmates struggled, the model of five pages, introduction with argument, three paragraphs to support the argument, and the conclusion made perfect sense. These skills in writing academic style papers continued to serve me all through college. Every paper written in high school and college began with an outline, using the same format I learned in elementary school.

In high school my love of literature and science was allowed to grow in leaps and bounds. We were exposed to a diverse group of authors including Chinua Achebe, Joseph Conrad, Jamaica Kincaid, Sandra Cisneros, Herman Melville, and Homer. My science curriculum included the standards of Biology, Chemistry and AP Chemistry, but also Human Anatomy and Physiology and a special offering of Marine Biology (as a result of a petition circulated by my class). It was not only the access to these books and labs that kept me engaged with learning, but also the manner in which the materials were presented. The room in which Cultural Anthropology was taught was decorated with advertisements collected during the teacher's travels. During the time we studied the *Odyssey*, our teacher painted a giant map on the wall to track all the spots visited. To hone our observation skills, the biology teacher would pin 1-3 new items to the walls each week and the students who spotted them first would receive extra credit. This was no easy feat as the walls were adorned with years of artifacts, many from previous students.

As a child, the thought of standing up and doing multiple presentations just seemed like another horrible homework assignment designed by the teacher. For some classmates, these assignments were incredibly trying. To our teacher's credit, she worked very hard to provide a safe and supportive environment – no easy feat with a room full of antsy third graders. My parents also worked with us for hours – helping us edit our drafts, and rehearsing endlessly until we had the speeches memorized. When I presented my speech on how to use chopsticks, my mother called in a favor and obtained 25 pairs of chopsticks for my classmates to use and keep.

In addition to the academics, my elementary school also believed in exposing us to the arts and other real world experiences. In fourth grade we read several (abridged) plays by Shakespeare and our school also staged a version of *Macbeth*. My two best friends and I were convinced we should be the three witches and rehearsed endlessly. You can only imagine my disappointment when the role of the witches went to three sixth graders and I was chosen to play "Servant #2."

I was lucky to grow up in Los Angeles, where field trips could include museums, parks, plays and even grocery stores. Field trips that still stand out in my memory include going to the Will Geer Theater to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the La Brea Tar Pits, and a children's opera of *Hansel and Gretel*. We were taught that these were all experiences to enjoy and did not have to be limited to school hours. My brothers and I strongly feel that this early exposure to the arts is why we are all still theater patrons to this day. We also do not limit ourselves to one genre – modern music, opera, plays, spoken word, we love them all.

Learning the skills to speak in front of groups of people on a variety of topics at an early age translated into social and leadership skills invaluable for college and the working world. From a

small private high school, I made the decision to attend a very large state university. My graduating class in high school was less than 125 students, and here I was choosing a school where 150 students in an undergraduate lecture was the norm. My freshman year I chose to room with a girl I had known in high school, partly because we knew we could get along, but also partly because this way, college began with one immediate friend.

Immediately after we moved in, both of us developed different sets of friends based upon our individual interests. It was easy, going from class to class to begin to see familiar faces and strike up conversations. College also afforded the opportunity to join student organizations built around shared interests and make new friends.

I entered college as a biochemistry major with the eventual goal of attending medical school. This decision was one I had reached on my own based upon my love of science in high school. However, it became clear during my freshman year that as much as I wanted to be a science major and become a doctor, there were others in my class who wanted it even more. For the first time, my ability to take lecture notes and have them imprint upon my memory was challenged. In my second quarter, I struggled again in my “hard science” courses and found myself enjoying my social science general education course. By the end of that quarter, I realized I needed to make a decision. I had to either decide upon a new major and potential career trajectory, or throw myself even deeper into science and work to bring my grades up.

At that time, the courses I was excelling in were in the relatively small and little known program of Asian American Studies. At the time, Asian American Studies was an interdepartmental program (now formally recognized as its own academic department) that pulled faculty and coursework from a variety of fields. For a student such as myself who enjoys knowing a little bit of everything, having choices in history, English, comparative literature, film, theater, sociology, and anthropology was a veritable feast.

Now that I had found an undergraduate major in which I was engaged in my own learning, I had to tell my parents about my change of major. The question of “what do you do with a major like that” was not unknown to me – it was one I had already grappled with. My initial plan was to use a degree in social sciences to become a high school teacher or attend graduate school for a Masters and Doctorate in ethnic studies and become a college professor.

I like to think that all the earlier persuasion speeches in elementary school factored in to how my conversation with my parents went. I had my argument (I was not happy and wanted to switch majors), evidence (my grades in the new courses were higher than my biochemistry grades), and a suggested action plan (rather than a medical doctor, I was simply shifting to becoming an academic doctor.)

Throughout the remainder of my time in college, I never lacked for choices of courses that I wanted to take. In one term, I could be taking a course on contemporary Chinese literature, a course on Asian American writers, and British literature and film of the 1960's. Once again, I was presented with more books than I could ever have time to read. Each term when it was

time to go buy textbooks, inevitably a few books for classes I was not enrolled in would find their way into my shopping basket simply because they looked interesting and I had to have them.

As it drew closer to graduation, once again I was at a crossroads. My earlier intention to become a professor had been tabled, while graduate school was still a possibility, it was not on the immediate horizon. By accident my senior year of college, I had begun working in an office on campus. I had started out like any other undergraduate, answering phones, sorting mail, and stocking office supplies.

Shortly before graduation, the then office manager filed a grievance against the executive director, alleging harassment and unfair work conditions. As my desk was directly outside of their doors, the manager tried to convince me that I had seen and heard many of these instances she was alleging. It was an uncomfortable position to put any employee in, let alone a 21 year old with no real sense of the world. The moral compass my elementary school teachers had instilled so many years before kicked in, and when questioned, answered as honestly and in the most neutral way I could.

With each of my earlier jobs, I made a point of observing and learning from my coworkers and my director supervisors. I watched how the marketing department would brainstorm and work collectively on ad campaigns, how the business department set deadlines and business goals, and how each supervisor interacted with their direct reports and how that relationship affected their group as a whole. I quickly came to realize that the skills I valued in supervisors were akin to those of my favorite elementary school teachers. This includes knowing what every member of your team does, knowing the names of those around you even if they are not directly in your office, being a team player and able to jump in and help, and leading by example. As a southpaw, I struggled with learning how to write cursive correctly. I still remember Ms. Marks coming over and showing me the tricks she (another leftie) had learned to help her write. Over the years, I have woven all of these skills into my individual management style, and like any good teacher, I continue to learn from those around me.

With advancing positions of responsibility, the ability to speak comfortably with diverse groups of people and on multiple levels is vital. The preparation begun in elementary school has served me through countless presentations to groups of varying sizes and using multiple forms of media. Ever since Mr. Evans taught us about “power” and “crutch” words in sixth grade, I cringe if I hear myself say “um.” I remember to give every presentation with conviction and to speak honestly with both my words and my actions.



To this day, one of the most valuable things I learned from being “gifted” was how to truly be myself. My teachers fostered the strengths they saw in my learning and allowed me to experiment with others. By understanding how I learn, I have been able to successfully complete college and graduate school. By knowing that being engaged with the content allows me to be successful, I left college an academically well-rounded individual. I am able to speak and connect with people from diverse backgrounds, and also am comfortable

speaking in both small and large groups. I have learned to always aim for my very best – that actions are not necessarily about “T-R-Y-ing” and more about “doing.” Most importantly, I left elementary school not knowing that my learning experiences were any different from the students in the “regular” classroom. To me – it was just school.

Technology and Gifted Learning



A Virtual Field Trip

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Introduction

Virtual fieldtrips are a means to discover the world via technology. A virtual fieldtrip can help students explore the past, present, and future. Examine the many learning experiences that can be applied to a virtual fieldtrip

Academic Language

- a. Collection
- b. Gallery
- c. Docent
- d. Exhibition
- e. Placard
- f. Curator
- g. Hall
- h. Display
- i. Case
- j. Antique
- k. Artifact
- l. Museology

Research Questions

- a. How is what I am seeing connected to what I already know or my previous knowledge?
- b. What new questions arise because of what I have seen?

Where is there more information about this object or topic?

Following are three activities to consider that accompany a virtual fieldtrip

- a. Become a Docent: Prepare a “talk” that would facilitate the understandings of visitors to one of the galleries in the museum.
- b. Become a Curator: Prepare a set of placards for an exhibition in the museum that was visited.

Study Museology: Design a three-dimensional museum complete with a publication for the exhibition. Share it with the class.