

Learning That Lasts a Lifetime: Former Students Tell Us What Works!

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Article Overview: Have you ever heard a former student say – “You are the best teacher!”

Your class is the best!” “Learning With a Life Long Impact: Former Students Tell Us What Works!” focuses on the impact of gifted programs. Former gifted students reveal seven basic factors that stand out as being significant in their education, lives and careers and reverberate with THE POWER OF THE PROCESS!

Have you ever heard one of your students say – “You are the best teacher!” Your class is the best!” If so, why? Or think about your own “favorite” teacher or “best” class. Why did each hold that honor? Stories from former students have fascinated me throughout my career.

When students return to talk with me or I go to their weddings or other special events, I ask, “What do you remember from school? What experiences were most valuable? Which lessons made a difference in your life?”

Which teachers make a difference to you? Which courses and skills do you remember? Which lessons helped to shape you as the person you are today or the career that you presently enjoy? This article is based on my passion for teaching and learning and interest in the impact that certain teachers and learning experiences have on students, learning that lasts a lifetime. They reiterate THE POWER OF THE PROCESS.

There are two significant experiences from which this article takes root. The first was in June of 1985. The phone rang and it was Joan, the parent of a former student. She asked if I had a copy of a seven minute movie that her daughter had helped write and produce as a sixth grade enrichment project. I ran to check, and sure enough I found it, The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody! But why did she want a copy of this after so many years? Lisa, her daughter, was graduating from UCLA with her master’s degree and attributes her success to this particular enrichment project, one thought of, designed, developed, produced, and assessed by her sixth grade gifted classmates. At the age of 23 Lisa believed that the gifted program challenged her in many ways and this particular project, The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody, was the reason she received the National Science Endowment Award for her research in obesity and finding the possible connection between the endocrine system and weight gain when smokers stop smoking. Her work earned a fellowship to Cornell University to continue her research and work towards her medical degree. Since then, she has completed her degree and is a doctor at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. I was curious that this enrichment project could have been so significant, so I met with Lisa and she wrote the following to explain the importance of creativity and pursuing what you love.

"How many school children are excused from regular classes in order to be tied to a railroad track? To produce and market products for Kids Unlimited, our student created and operated company? To compare products in a bakery shop, wholesale and retail? To explore the snow woods looking for tracks and hypothesizing and brainstorming from what you find? Not many! Yet how many children pursue master's, doctoral and medical degrees? Probably just a few! But what correlation can be drawn between these? They both nurture the joy and excitement of learning.

My most memorable years of school were during my participation in the gifted program working on exceptional learning activities. All of them were fun, challenging and different. I was given the freedom to discover and ask WHY! Some classmates thought that being an entrepreneur, producing a movie, building a futuristic city, and acting as president of a company were just fun. The objectives were not always apparent, which made them all the more exciting, but they were valuable lessons to be learned.

Through these experiences I discovered Spain by experiencing its language, dances and food. The 1990s came alive by acting in a student-created movie, listening to our barbershop and brass quartets, writing a news report about the Oklahoma Sooners, creating a new song "Deep in the Heart of Pittsburgh", and having a 1990's picnic in the park. Teamwork, finance, and democracy were the objectives achieved by selling stock in our start up company, electing directors, making products to sell, and showing a net profit. Economics in action.

Instead of reading, hearing or watching, I was doing! I believe to this day that my most meaningful experiences are those in which I am an active participant. From these, I realized that I had the potential to use my mind to create something of importance and value." (Lisa Jias, 1993 in "Challenging Students Through Extension and Exceptional Learning," Quality Outcomes-Drive Education Journal, McAleer, 17-19)

In June of 2000 the second significant moment occurred when I entered Duquesne University to teach the graduate course, Teaching Gifted and Talented Students. There in the front row was Melissa Kirsch Munnell. She had been identified as a gifted student in the late 1970s and was a student of mine for five years in elementary school. Now she was in my graduate working towards her Master's degree in Special Education. It had been twenty years since she had been in the elementary gifted program. Melissa was married, a teacher, older, more mature, but had that same twinkle in her eye, passion for learning, intensity, and an endless stream of questions. Curious! Energetic! Asking WHY? Just like she had done twenty years before! It was exhilarating! Familiar! Boundary breaking!

Over the years I have enjoyed hearing former students return to tell me what they remembered about school and particularly my classroom. So I was enthusiastic about her proposal to create a project that would reveal what her former classmates in the elementary gifted program remembered as being significant in their lives. And on the last day of class, Melissa presented the research from which is the heart of this article. Additional responses have been added as I continue to investigate what learning last for a lifetime in the lives and careers of students.

The importance of this investigation was magnified in November of 2001 when a keynote by Sally Reis presented success stories of her former elementary gifted students. After attending a wedding of one of her former students, Dr. Joseph Renzulli remarked about the enthusiasm of the students as they reminisced about their elementary gifted program and the many ways in which these students had achieved in areas of their interests after they had graduated from college and graduate school. Sally

continued by presenting the stories of several students and the lifelong impact of Triad Level III investigations. Dr. Reis encouraged teachers to investigate the impact of gifted programs on students nationwide (Reis, 2001).

Today, with this research in mind I reiterate a statement I had written in 1993 and 1995 for two professional journals - "School experiences that make a difference in our students' futures are the PROCESS experiences, the 'doing' activities, the lessons in which our students put themselves into the content and use knowledge in a significant, creative, and personal way." ("Challenging Students Through Extension and Exceptional Learning," Quality Outcomes-Drive Education Journal, McAleer, 18)

(McAleer, 1993) Many activities that these students found to have impacted their lives and careers were initiated and expanded upon by students and teachers creating new ideas together. Risk taking and experimentation were encouraged. Imagination, inquiry and possibilities were stressed, while self-esteem was nourished. Success breeds success is clearly a guiding belief. As they attained essential skills, they were challenges to use, apply, and transform these concepts, understandings and skills to a meaningful level, one that will make a life long impact. The opposite occurs when students are asked to remember information and take a test to determine the quantity of ideas they have retained. In these types of experiences motivation and involvement are diminished significantly.

What do our former students encourage us to do in our classrooms to prepare them for life, their careers, and success? Seven basic factors stand out that students tell us are significant in their lives and careers -- Exploration of their Interests or Passions, Knowledge and Use of Thinking Processes, Use of the Skills of Collaboration and Teamwork, Encouragement of Curiosity, the Development of Self-Confidence, the Creation of Positive Self-Esteem and the Development of Leadership Skills. Let's look at what these students have to say about the life-long impact of each of these factors.

1. Exploration of Interests and Passions -

"Exploring my interests not only helped me to weed out areas that I had little interest in early on, but started me thinking about future interest/career paths long before my peers. My thoughts of going to med school were first planted there."

"To find my true being!"

"Enthusiasm for and love of learning"

"I was encouraged to explore my passion and change the curriculum to explore it fully. I surprised myself with the complexity, intensity, and depth of my work when I created the Human Automobile, combining fourth grade health and my love for cars."

"I feel really strongly about my experiences in the gifted program during the elementary years. For once, I wasn't swimming upstream in a boring, repetitive styled classroom. It was like so many of us could bloom by being free to really think without much of the prescribed boundaries."

"Time researching and creating in biology was unlimited. I was able and encouraged to continue my science experiment from year to year through middle school, high school and college. This enabled me to pursue my passion and work in-depth to make a significant contribution to this field."

2. Knowledge and Use of Thinking Processes to Create Independent Thinkers – Bloom's Hierarchy, Six Thinking Hats, Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, Independent Studies, Mentorships, Apprenticeships, Problem Solving Models, Decision Making Ten Systems, Implications Wheels, Futures Wheels, Personality and Learning Profiles, Creative Problem Solving, Spontaneous Thinking Strategies, Content + Process + Product Based Learning Objectives, SCAMPER,

"Independence! Autonomy!"

"Imagination, creative and critical thinking, flexibility, open-minded...."

"Our curriculum was a "paradigm shift" from what I had been used to."

"The most important skills imparted to me from this setting were critical thinking ones."

" ... thinking beyond the status quo."

"Not once did anyone tell me that I was 'wrong' or 'doing it the wrong way.' I guess I've lived my life in accordance to those phrases."

"The gifted program provided me with positive/increased opportunities with the outside world and has enabled me to succeed as a person, husband, and a father."

"To create at unstoppable rates"

"I ponder the idea that there are always two sides to every story."

"To think for myself, to ask the question that I still ask: 'WHY?'"

"Learning was fun and exciting, and didn't always have to involve drill and practice and traditional 'tests' and 'quizzes.'"

"I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant."

"I can remember learning that experimenting wasn't about producing right or wrong results. Any result, good or bad was informative. It was about the experience. One of my particular projects focused on creating a unique recipe and as simple as that sounds, the process allowed me to go from gathering the goods and information to assessing positive, negative and then altering it until I had created the best result. It was about the process – all of the types of thinking that go into it."

"Gifted education might be one place where the focus is less on testing for achievement and more on other measures of success. Students are able to create their own goals and their success will not be measured by a simple score out of a hundred."

"My CFO just asked me to find a way to accurately project and account for rebates our company will receive from one of our manufacturers. It is of high importance since the rebating will give the company a competitive advantage only if we are able to create a unique system for the whole process. My response reflects what I learned in the elementary gifted program, "Eureka!" It has been approximately 20 years since I created the "BACK-UP BUDDY" during our invention unit, but I live my life through shades of gray, in the realm of creativity."

"What I feel was primary was the focus on 'Natural Creativity' – I learned to apply creative thought fundamentally – meaning that we were constantly presented with opportunity and challenge to openly and purely approach something...anything. There were no scripts and so the "learning" developed

naturally and as a result of the creative and curious mind. I feel several of our projects, be they IEPs, selected topics, or co-operative projects, all shared this primary element. We learned to explore, to think critically and uniquely simply by having the hands on opportunity to come to our own conclusions."

"...teach them to fish and they will eat for a lifetime..." Learning to Learn, that's what will last a lifetime. We learned to learn. The program allowed us to think fully, and in hindsight, to realize what we had done."

"Did I mention that I wish I could go back to your classroom for a few months? Even now, as an adult, I don't think the critical concepts would be any less relevant or any less effective. In fact, it would be a refreshing and rut-breaking gift to my mind. Thinking should never get stale!"

"The gifted program was the most influential learning experience of my entire life. I learned how to think creatively, think outside of the box, to think differently ...things that make me the unique person I am now. It helped me develop into a free thinker and be open minded to different types of ideas."

3. Development of Skills of Collaboration and Teamwork -

"Creating our film, The Return of Rip Van Myrtle, was the pinnacle. It was collaborative and challenging and above all, it was truly ours. There was no script handed down. The ideas were developed by the collective and critical thinking of all of us. It was assessed and refined and the result was a unique thing."

"Collaborative learning was much more relaxed and, usually, more fruitful. We developed skills of cooperation and teamwork."

"Collaboration with intellectual peers gave me a better understanding of cooperation, teamwork, and leadership at a much higher level."

"I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant. I was not looked down on because thought differently and spoke my mind about topics or readings."

"I am so glad that I got the opportunity in the gifted program to compete in Odyssey of the Mind, an international competition focusing on creative problem solving and teamwork... OM is the best competition in which I participated. OM takes creativity, brainstorming, teamwork, decision making and problem solving to a new level. Why? Because you have to do it with a team! I learned how to solve difficult problems that need creativity. With my team I learned to listen and not jump to a solution quickly. All I heard in college was 'You have to be a good team player!' 'You have to be able to learn to play different roles on a team.' 'Employers look for team players and leaders.' Well, the future looks great for George, Tony, Ben, Brad, Glen and me because from fifth until our senior year, we honed those skills by working together on OM for months at a time and are proud to have achieved the level of World Finalists and World Rantra Fusca Outstanding Creativity winners."

"I remember working with a group of students to create, The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody. We were a team excited to study the period in history between 1890 and 1899, a period of change and innovation in Pittsburgh. We were given the opportunity to produce any kind of product to show what we were learning related to the theme. We brainstormed key ideas about Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: the geography of the area; the lives and contributions of the people who imagined and built Pittsburgh, such as Carnegie, Mellon, and Frick; the arts a music of the time; entertainment; family life; ethnic cultures, to name the main topics. We worked together and wrote a lay using these ideas, The Grievous Grieves of Gertrude Goodbody, a silent movie set during this decade in the town of trolleys.

Gertrude depicted a young girl's struggle with the villainous landlord and a mother who was unable to support her family. When her rent went unpaid, Gertrude was taken from her mother as payment, tied to the trolley tracks by the villain, and as the trolley drew dangerously closer, the Pittsburgh Hero came to her rescue, untied Gertrude, took care of the villain, and everyone lived happily ever after. The seven minute silent movie was written, created, produced and directed by the students with the help of an old Super 8 movie camera. Everything was done by us, not with the purpose of theatrical perfection, but with emphasis on imagination, creativity and spirit of cooperation and collaboration."

"I remember two things that I did in school, and both were in the gifted support class. One was the design and construction of the Urban Rapid Transit, a complete transportation system used in our visionary 'City of the Future.' The other was writing, filming, acting in and directing 'The Grievous Grievances of Gertrude Goodbody.'

4. Development of Self-Confidence -

"The belief that my ideas and work have value..."

"I felt more open about trying-out for things that interested me, but for which I had no prior knowledge or skill. There are many the positions that I filled because no one else had tried-out or asked about them. The infectious enthusiasm demonstrated by my gifted support teacher and the rest of my cohort gave me confidence in myself in interview situations and the like that I do not feel would have been present if my education had been purely traditional. Over the past three years, I have had about a dozen interviews with major teaching hospital department chairpersons that were a breeze because I felt "on similar grounds" with these other "smart" folk."

"Confidence in myself and the fact that my creative ideas would be accepted and even praised at a very early age..."

"In elementary school I had my first truly exhilarating experience when I discovered that I could create, create ideas that were worthwhile, important, and valuable to me and others. It gave me the self-confidence that my ideas were significant and important."

5. Creation of Positive Self-Concept and Self-Esteem --

"Most of all, I think gifted education made me think better of myself. No longer afraid of being smart, I felt comfortable hanging out with a bunch of other smart children. I developed confidence there that would carry-on into future endeavors. Trying a 'different approach' didn't feel unorthodox. I have recently made two major career changes, and I feel that without a prior early experience of being somewhat adventurous, that this may not have happened."

"The teacher made me love my uniqueness."

"I learned that my ideas were not odd or unimportant. I was not looked down on because I thought differently and spoke my mind about topics or readings."

"Change, inquiry and imagination were stressed, while self-esteem was nurtured."

"I was encouraged to try more complex things and ultimately learned independence."

6. Encouragement of Curiosity --

"Gifted education was just plain fun. Whether it was an architectural field trip or starting our own mini-business, gifted education provided me with a welcome break from the standard math, science, English, etc. We were challenged in a manner that was fun and informative. I try to use similar techniques when teaching med students and junior residents."

"I feel really strongly about my experiences in the gifted program during those years. For once, I wasn't swimming upstream in a boring, repetitive styled classroom. It was like so many of us could bloom by being free to really think without much of the prescribed boundaries."

"I could develop learning activities using Bloom's Taxonomy Wall that were imaginative, challenging and released my curiosity!"

7. Development of Leadership Skills --

"The program stands out in my mind as a start to my creativity, strong 'people' skills, and the intrinsic belief that my ideas and work have value. I do believe that it helped encourage the leadership skills that I have carried throughout my life and my career."

"You showed me how to be alive and joyful and to dare great things. I am opinionated and love to laugh. As a teacher myself, I saw all the pitfalls and difficulties that being so different could bring. But with you as teacher and advocate and mentor, it never occurred to me that there was anything scary or hard about the thing at all. You made me love my uniqueness."

"These days, it seems everyone is always using the phrase 'think outside the box.' In fact, during my time spent in advertising in NY, we used it constantly. It was how we won projects; it was what we looked for in hiring; and frankly, it was how I'd gotten promoted. And there is no doubt in my mind that this ability or comfort in approaching situations uniquely was enhanced by so much of what I was able to experience in the gifted program's testing ground."

"Instead of reading, hearing or watching, I was doing! I believe to this day that my most meaningful experiences are those in which I am an active participant. From these, I realized that I had the potential to use my mind to create something of importance and value."

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- These seven factors have been found in educational research and provide a checklist for teachers as they develop curricula and strategies to challenge and motivate students in gifted pull out programs or in the regular classroom. Over and over students tell us what Laura Lorenze emphasized in our interview on December 29, 2002 and in her written assessment of her gifted program experiences -- it is "about the process!" (Lorenze, 2003) Former students from the 1970s tell the impact of exploring their interests, passions, thinking skills, especially those related to creativity, teamwork, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-concept, curiosity, and leadership skills. The voices of these former students put faces and hearts to the research. Which lessons do you teach that will impact your student's lives for a life time?
 - With thanks to all of the students who have shared their thoughts about their elementary gifted program experiences in this article and Melissa Kirsch Munnell, Laura Lorenze, and Dr. Lisa Jias for their interest in "Learning With a Life Long Impact."
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- Franny McAleer is an author of 20 books and 28 articles. She is an international consultant, teacher, Instructor at Duquesne University and the PA Department of Education. Her customized keynotes and workshops for teachers, parents, and students provide research based strategies that support the NoChildLeft Behind Act.

1) Learning That Lasts a Lifetime

2) Curriculum Differentiation ... One Size Does Not Fit All

3) Improve Reading Writing and Speaking Across the Curriculum Using Six Thinking Hats

4) Catch Them Thinking—Critically and Creatively

5) Turn Up the Challenge for Gifted and High Ability Students

6) Be an Inventor

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