Chapter 3
The Gifted Practitioner

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to define gifted practitioners, to describe how they develop, and to show how their development can be fostered. Gifted practitioners are teachers who have continued to grow in their practice until they have become widely recognized as extraordinary teachers. The authors begin by examining the creative process, then showing how the creative process and teacher development are very similar processes. Both involve tacit learning through experience, the discovery of new ideas by making tacit knowledge explicit, and the further development of those ideas through design and evaluation. These ideas will be used as a basis for fostering giftedness in teaching. A case example will be used to provide an illustration of the gifted practitioner, followed by a discussion of the implications for the profession of teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Giftedness in teaching is often regarded as somewhat of a mystery. Truly exceptional teaching is often attributed to intangible qualities, such as persistence, independence, a strong sense of intrinsic motivation, a high level of self-awareness, a willingness to take risks, and a student-centered approach to teaching (Jeffrey & Craft, 2006; Reilly, Lilly, Bramwell, & Kronish, 2011; Woods, 1995; Woods & Jeffrey, 1996). Such attributions are helpful to a point. They appropriately recognize the role of higher level dispositions in the creative process. However, notwithstanding a few studies that have focused on creating an environment conducive to creativity, the process for developing gifted teaching in the classroom is largely overlooked (Etelapelto & Lahti, 2008; Henze, van Driel, & Verloop, 2009).

The purpose of this chapter is to define gifted practitioners, to describe how they develop and to show how their development can be fostered. Gifted practitioners are teachers who have continued to grow in their practice until they have become widely recognized as extraordinary teachers. Gifted practitioners have acquired a highly integrated knowledge of teacher and student interactions within specific contexts of teaching by creating highly functional systems of motivating students, managing the classroom, and fostering learning. In their practice, they have a high level of flexibility, display creative solutions to
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problems, and possess a keen insight into the context of their teaching. Their students demonstrate high levels of engagement, autonomy, higher-level thinking, and self-awareness.

To become a gifted practitioner, a teacher must constantly seek new experiences and new ideas. Then he or she must be able to generalize from those experiences to create new concepts about teaching. The practice of gifted practitioners gradually becomes more and more integrated and complex. Each new layer of complexity creates a new opportunity for student engagement and provides the gifted practitioner with a new platform from which to develop new instructional designs. Gifted practitioners use these opportunities to design new instructional strategies that foster their own professional development as well as their students’ growth.

When fully mature, gifted practitioners are creative designers of new instructional practices. They can design and implement open systems that facilitate both their students’ and their own learning. In other words, they can create a system that empowers student voice, invites teacher and students into new types of interactions, and asks open-ended questions that enable new thinking by all participants, including the teacher. At the highest level, gifted practitioners can contribute what they have learned to the literature through research and practice.

In this chapter, we begin by examining the creative process, then show how the creative process and teacher development are very similar processes. Both involve tacit learning through experience, the discovery of new ideas by making tacit knowledge explicit, and the further development of those ideas through extension and evaluation. These ideas will be used as a basis for fostering giftedness in teaching. A case example will be used to provide an illustration of the gifted practitioner, followed by a discussion of the implications for the profession of teaching.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

To begin our discussion on giftedness in teaching, we first turn to the interdisciplinary work on the creative process. Most interdisciplinary accounts of the creative process typically describe four different stages. Generally speaking, these include a long period of preparation involving the development of expertise in a field, followed by a deep level of engagement with a problem that ultimately leads to a spontaneous insight, which is gradually reworked during a longer period of implementation (Weisberg, 2006). Based on his review of the literature on creativity, Sawyer (2003) summarized this four-step process as described below.

Preparation

Creative ideas are usually preceded by at least ten years of preparation in a particular field of endeavor, even for the most talented individuals (Ericsson, 2006). With increasing expertise, experts are able to “chunk” individual pieces of procedural knowledge into larger elements, enabling them to accomplish tasks more quickly with less mental effort (Ericsson, 2006). The acquisition of more complex mental representations enables them to see solutions from multiple perspectives and exercise more flexibility in their thinking (Crawford, Schlager, Toyama, Riel, & Vahey, 2005).
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