



> [Return to NAGC Website](#)

THE DOS AND DON'TS OF INSTRUCTION: *What It Means To Teach Gifted Learners Well*

by Carol Ann Tomlinson, Ed.D, The University of Virginia

Some people suggest that gifted education is just sort of "fluffy" or enriching-gravy on the potatoes, perhaps, but not anything especially substantial or critical in the way of mental fare. Others propose that all gifted education is what's good for all students. Unfortunately, those two criticisms sometimes stem from observing classrooms where gifted learners are taught inappropriately.

So what does it mean to teach a highly able student well? Of course it will vary some with the age of the child, the subject, the learning style of the student-and possibly even the child's gender or culture. Certainly appropriate instruction for such learners varies for a child who comes to school rich with experiences vs. a child who is equally able but lacks richness of experience. And it will vary with a child who has immense potential vs. a peer with somewhat less capacity. Nonetheless, there are general indicators of appropriate curriculum and instruction for highly able students (in their areas of strength)- and general indicators of inappropriate curriculum and instruction for such learners.

Good Instruction For Gifted Learners

1) **Good curriculum and instruction for gifted learners begins with good curriculum and instruction.** It's difficult, if not impossible, to develop the talent of a highly able student with insipid curriculum and instruction. Like all students, gifted learners need learning experiences that are rich. That is, they need learning experiences that are organized by key concepts and principles of a discipline rather than by facts. They need content that is relevant to their lives, activities that cause them to process important ideas at a high level, and products that cause them to grapple with meaningful problems and pose defensible solutions. They need classrooms that are respectful to them, provide both structure and choice, and help them achieve more than they thought they could. These are needs shared by all learners, not just those who are gifted. But good instruction for gifted learners must begin there.

2) **Good teaching for gifted learners is paced in response to the student's individual needs.** Often, highly able students learn more quickly than others their age. As a result, they typically need a more rapid instructional pace than do many of their peers. Educators sometimes call that "acceleration," which makes the pace sound risky. For many gifted learners, however, it's the comfortable pace-like walking "quickly" suits someone with very long legs. It's only "fast" for someone with shorter legs. On the other hand, it's often the case that advanced learners need a slower pace of instruction than many other students their age, so they can achieve a depth or breadth of understanding needed to satisfy a big appetite for knowing.

3) **Good teaching for gifted learners happens at a higher "degree of difficulty" than for many students their age.** In the Olympics, the most accomplished divers perform dives that have a higher "degree of difficulty" than those performed by divers whose talents are not as advanced. A greater degree of difficulty calls on more skills-more refined skills-applied at a higher plane of sophistication. A high "degree of difficulty" for gifted learners in their talent areas implies that their content, processes

and products should be more complex, more abstract, more open-ended, more multifaceted than would be appropriate for many peers. They should work with fuzzier problems, will often need less teacher-imposed structure, and (in comparison to the norm) should have to make greater leaps of insight and transfer than would be appropriate for many their age. Gifted learners may also (but not always) be able to function with a greater degree of independence than their peers.

4) **Good teaching for gifted learners requires an understanding of "supported risk."** Highly able learners often make very good grades with relative ease for along time in school. They see themselves (and often rightly so) as expected to make "As," get right answers, and lead the way. In other words, they succeed without "normal" encounters with failure. Then, when a teacher presents a high-challenge task, the student feels threatened. Not only has he or she likely not learned to study hard, take risks and strive, but the student's image is threatened as well. A good teacher of gifted students understands that dynamic, and thus invites, cajoles and insists on risk-but in a way that supports success. When a good gymnastics coach asks a talented young gymnast to learn a risky new move, the coach ensures that the young person has the requisite skills, then practices the move in harness for a time. Then the coach "spots" for the young athlete. Effective teachers of gifted learners do likewise.

Inappropriate Instruction For Gifted Learners

1) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it asks them to do things they already know how to do, and then to wait for others to learn how. Many advanced learners regularly complete assignments calling on materials, ideas and skills they have already mastered. Then they wait for peers to catch up, rather than being pre-assessed and assigned more advanced materials, ideas and skills when they demonstrate competency.

2) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it asks them to do "more of the same stuff faster." Reading more books that are too easy and doing more math problems that have ceased being a challenge are killers of motivation and interest.

3) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it cuts them loose from peers and the teacher for long periods of time. Asking a highly able student to sit at a desk in the back of the room and move through the math book alone ignores a child's need for affiliation, and overlooks the fact that a teacher should be a crucial factor in all children's learning. It also violates the importance of meaningful peer interaction in the learning process, as well as in the process of social and emotional development.

4) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it is structured around "filling time." Highly able students are often asked to go write a play, complete a puzzle, or do classroom chores because they have completed required tasks that take others longer. It would be difficult to defend such practices as a high-quality use of educational time.

5) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when they spend substantial time in the role of tutor or "junior teacher." All students need to be colleagues for one another, giving a hand or clarifying procedures when needed. That's quite different from when advanced learners spend chunks of time on a regular basis teaching what they already know to students who are having difficulty. Some educators suggest that doesn't harm highly able learners because their test scores remain high. That begs the question of the extended learning these students might have garnered had the same amount of time been spent in pursuit of well-planned new ideas and skills.

6) Instruction for gifted learners is inappropriate when it is rooted in novel, "enriching" or piecemeal learning experiences. If a child were a very talented pianist, we would question the quality of her music teacher if the child regularly made toy pianos, read stories about peculiar happenings in the music world, and did word-search puzzles on the names of musicians. Rather, we would expect the student to work directly with the theory and performance of music in a variety of forms and at consistently

escalating levels of complexity. We would expect the young pianist to be learning how a musician thinks and works, and to be developing a clear sense of her own movement toward expert-level performance in piano. Completing word-search puzzles, building musical instruments and reading about oddities in the lives of composers may be novel, may be "enriching," (and certainly seems lacking in coherent scope and sequence, and therefore sounds piecemeal). But those things will not foster high-level talent development in music. The same hold true for math, history, science, and so on.

It's Actually Simple-In Theory

What it takes to teach gifted learners well is actually a little common sense. It begins with the premise that each child should come to school to stretch and grow daily. It includes the expectation that the measure of progress and growth is competition with oneself rather than competition against others. It resides in the notion that educators understand key concepts, principles and skills of subject domains, and present those in ways that cause highly able students to wonder and grasp, and extend their reach. And it envisions schooling as an escalator on which students continually progress, rather than a series of stairs, with landings on which advanced learners consistently wait.

It's not so hard to articulate. It's fiendishly difficult to achieve in schools where standardization is the norm, and where teachers are supported in being recipe followers, rather than flexible and reflective artisans. In schools where responsive instruction is a carefully supported indicator of professional growth, the capacity to extend even the most capable mind is a benchmark of success.

This article reprinted from the May 1997 issue of *Instructional Leader*, with permission from the [Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association](#).