

1

Effective Curriculum and Instructional Models for Talented Students

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This article presents an historical perspective on the evolution of three curriculum and instructional models that have been shown to be effective with gifted learners in various contexts and at various grade levels. It argues for consideration of all three models in a comprehensive program for gifted learners.

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2 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

Many people have been attracted to the issue of curriculum for the gifted because they feel it is new territory. While it is true that curriculum has not been a central focus in the field until recently, it would be inappropriate to conclude that we need new models and methods to provide appropriately differentiated learning experiences for gifted learners. The purpose of this paper is to present effective curriculum and instructional models that should form the basis of our curriculum efforts and to discuss their relevance to current school practices.

Over the last twenty years, general principles about appropriate curriculum for gifted children have been delineated. Ward (1961) developed a theory of differential education for the gifted that established specific principles around which an appropriate curriculum for the gifted would be developed. Meeker (1969) used the Guilford Structure of Intellect (SOI) to arrive at student profiles that highlighted areas of strength and weakness so that curriculum planners could build a gifted program to improve weak areas. Curriculum workbooks were structured specifically to address this need in the areas of memory, cognition, convergent thinking, divergent thinking, and evaluation. Renzulli (1977) focused on a differentiated curriculum model that moved the gifted child from enrichment exposure activities through training in thinking and research skills into a project-oriented program that dwelt on real problems to be solved. Gallagher (1975) stressed content modification in the core subject areas of language arts, social studies, mathematics and science. Stanley, Keating, and Fox (1974) concentrated on a content acceleration model to differentiate programs for the gifted. Recent writings, including Feldhusen and Kolloff (1978), Maker (1982), and VanTassel-Baska (1984) have stressed a confluent approach to differentiation of curriculum for the gifted that includes both acceleration and enrichment strategies. Passow (1982) formulated seven cardinal curriculum principles that reflect content, process, product, behavioral, and evaluative considerations.

In examining the state of the art of curriculum and instruction for the gifted, it is clear that there is a multiplicity of approaches that are adopted wholesale for classroom use without adequate testing in a research context and without consideration of their value in the overall educational context. In fact, the recipe approach seems the most popular at the present time. Throw together a special unit on the latest topic of interest in the larger socio-cultural context, add creative problem-solving, mix with higher level thinking skills, and stir in a special research project until done. In order to implement appropriate curriculum for gifted students, there must be concern for the faithful translation of sound models for curriculum and instruction into an action research arena where effectiveness can be continually tested. The curriculum and instructional models presented in this paper have all been tested and found effective with gifted learners. Furthermore, each model emerges from a clearly delineated theoretical and research context.

The three relatively distinct curriculum models that have proven effective with gifted populations at various stages of development and in various

domain-specific areas may be termed: 1) the content mastery model; 2) the process/product research model; and 3) the epistemological concept model.

THE CONTENT MODEL

The content model tends to emphasize the importance of learning skills and concepts within a predetermined domain of inquiry. Gifted students are encouraged to move as rapidly through the content area as possible and thus content acceleration in some mode tends to dominate the application of this model in practice. When the diagnostic-prescriptive ($D \rightarrow P$) instructional approach is utilized, students are pre-tested and then given appropriate materials to master the subject area segments prescribed.

The $D \rightarrow P$ instructional approach has proved effective in controlled settings, but has not been widely practiced in regular classrooms for the gifted. Several reasons appear to account for this: 1) like any individualized model, it requires a highly competent classroom manager to implement, for if used appropriately, each student may be working on a different problem, chapter, and even book at the same time. Regardless of the rhetoric surrounding individualization, very little of it is actively practiced in basic curriculum areas; 2) most pull-out gifted programs do not focus on core content areas and therefore avoid the model, even though such teachers are frequently highly skilled in individualized classroom management, and 3) the approach has not been particularly valued by many educators of the gifted because of its insistence on utilizing the same curriculum and merely altering rate. The lecture-discussion approach to the content model is more widely practiced at the secondary level, but its effectiveness is highly dependent on teachers being well versed in the structure as well as the content of their discipline. Too frequently the content model disintegrates into learning the exact same skills and concepts as all learners are expected to do in the school context, only doing more exercises and drill in a shorter period of time.

In the $D \rightarrow P$ approach, teachers and teaching assistants act as facilitators of instruction rather than as didactic lecturers; although many content-based programs for the gifted place a strong emphasis on lecture and discussion. The curriculum is organized by the intellectual content of the discipline and is highly sequential and cumulative in nature, making a proficiency-based model for achievement outcomes very feasible.

The $D \rightarrow P$ approach to the content model has been utilized effectively by the talent search programs across the country, particularly in mathematics (Keating, 1976; Benbow and Stanley, 1983). VanTassel-Baska (1984) has shown the effectiveness of the model in teaching Latin. And foreign language teachers have used the model for years to ensure English syntactic mastery in their students. Clearly it represents the most individualized instructional approach to basic curriculum for the gifted that might be undertaken, and embodies a continuous progress philosophy that schools can understand.

4 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

The more typical approach to content-based instruction, however, is one that presets the mastery level of expectation for students, frequently requiring more advanced skills and concepts to be mastered one year earlier. The content model employs existing school curriculum and textbooks, so it is not costly to implement. And it attempts to respond to the rate needs of individual students, allowing the very able to move more quickly through the traditional curriculum.

In successful implementations of the model, teachers have made important alterations in the organization of the subject matter being taught. For example, in the fast-paced Latin program, the concepts spread out incrementally over the first three chapters of the book are synthesized into a matrix study sheet, presenting students all five Latin cases, three genders, and two numbers in their various combinations all at once. Homework is assigned only from the third unit where all the interactions of gender, number and case may be practiced. Thus 30 hours of instructional time may be reduced to four or five at the most. And gifted students have mastered the important concepts governing beginning Latin syntax in economical fashion.

Thus what appears as a simple process of moving more quickly through the same basic material takes on a level of sophistication in actual practice. The effective $D \rightarrow P$ teacher reorganizes the content area under study according to higher level skills and concepts so that the focus of student prescriptive work is in larger increments that carry with them a holistic picture of the topic under study.

The content mastery model for curriculum and instruction also carries with it the capacity to reduce the regular skill-based curriculum for gifted learners in reading as well as mathematics to approximately one-third the time currently expended. This process occurs through two distinct approaches to modifying the curriculum: 1) allowing students to move through the skill development areas at a rate commensurate with their capacity, testing for proficiency and assigning work based on documented increased levels of development, and 2) reorganizing basic skill areas into higher level skill clusters in order to conserve mastery learning time and promote more efficient and challenging learning experiences for talented students.

The first approach might be accomplished through the following modifications:

Reading Curriculum: Topic: Word Attack Skills

Typical Learner Sequence:

Recognizing and Sounding out Consonants → Recognizes and Sounding out Vowels → Phonemes → Prefixes, Suffixes

$D \rightarrow P$ Gifted Learner Sequence:

Pretest on Reading → Analysis of skill gaps inhibiting reading → Prescription of work on phonemes, prefixes, and suffixes

Effective Curriculum and Instructional Models for Talented Students 5

The second approach would be accomplished through this additional modification, again in the reading curriculum:

Typical Learner Sequence:

Topic: Word Attack Skills

Subtopics: Recognizing and sounding out consonants, recognizing and sounding out vowels, phonemes, and prefixes and suffixes.

D → P

Gifted Learner Sequence:

Topic: Reading recognition (whole words)

Subtopics: Word attack skills

Prefixes and suffixes

Root words

Through these two modifications then, gifted students can master the typical skill-based curriculum in less time and at an appropriate level of complexity and challenge. For much of the elementary reading, mathematics, and language curriculum, this approach is feasible and efficacious for gifted learners.

The content mastery model, however, does have some limitations and drawbacks. It does not work well in learning tasks where speed and compression are not a relevant consideration. One could hardly imagine reading Shakespeare based on the tenets of content mastery, nor probing a significant world problem. In addition many teachers have interpreted the content mastery model to be merely “covering material” faster and assigning greater amounts of homework, so that many special classes using it deteriorate into a focus on the quantity of consumed material rather than the quality of the learning experience.

THE PROCESS-PRODUCT MODEL

The process/product model places heavy emphasis on learning investigatory skills, both scientific and social that allow students to develop a high quality product. It is a highly collaborative model that involves teacher-practitioner-student as an interactive team in exploring specific topics. Consultation and independent work dominate the instructional pattern, culminating in student understanding of the scientific process as it is reflected in selective exploration of key topics.

Discussed in the literature under the rubric of programs like enrichment triad and the Purdue model (Renzulli, 1977; Feldhusen and Kolloff, 1978), this approach to curriculum for the gifted can be viewed as successful. At the secondary level, special science programs for the gifted have used the model (VanTassel-Baska and Kulieke, 1986). And institutions like Walnut Hills

6 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

High School in Cincinnati, Bronx High School of Science, and the North Carolina School of Math and Science have practiced the model as a part of their high-powered science programs for a number of years.

The model seeks to engage the student in problem-finding and problem-solving and to put him in contact with adult practitioners. In the field of science, for example, scientists from Argonne National Laboratory work with academically talented junior high students during the summer to help them develop research proposals for project work during the following academic year. Students actively engage in the generation of a research topic, conduct a literature search, select an experimental design, and lay out their plan of work in a proposal. The proposal is then critiqued by their instructor and the scientist. In this way then, students focus on process skill development in scientific inquiry and strive to develop a high quality product. The following chart delineates the three stages of the inquiry process used in the Northwestern-Argonne program.

Pre-Inquiry (Level 1 skills)

- ___ 1. The student has acquired scientific knowledge relevant to the question being asked.
- ___ 2. The student has done a review of related background literature.

Methods of Inquiry (Level 2 skills)

- ___ 1. The student plans to:
 - ___ a. use the techniques of identifying objects and object properties.
 - ___ b. use the technique of making controlled observations.
 - ___ c. examine changes in various physical systems.
 - ___ d. order a series of observations.
 - ___ e. classify various physical and biological systems by coding and tabulating data.
 - ___ f. use the techniques of ordering, counting, adding, multiplying, dividing, finding averages, and using decimals.
 - ___ g. demonstrate the rules of measurement as applicable to specific physical and biological systems (i.e., length, area, volume, weight, temperature, force, or speed).
 - ___ h. conduct an experiment by identifying and controlling variables.
- ___ 2. The student has created operational definitions for the variables under study.
- ___ 3. The student has stated a testable research hypothesis.

Effective Curriculum and Instructional Models for Talented Students 7

- ___ 4. The student plans to manipulate some type of materials.
- ___ 5. The student has followed the specified proposal format.

Interpretive Inquiry Skills (Level 3 skills)

- ___ 1. The student transformed the observed results into graphs, tables, diagrams, and reports.
- ___ 2. The student drew relationships among things he or she had observed.
- ___ 3. The student generalized from his observations.
- ___ 4. The student interpreted tabular and graphical data.
- ___ 5. The student used the skills of interpolation and extrapolation to make predictions based on his data.
- ___ 6. The student made inferences based on his data.
- ___ 7. The student related data to statements of hypotheses.
- ___ 8. The student related previous work to his/her own.
- ___ 9. The student used the specified project format.
- ___ 10. The student developed some limitations of his study.

The process-product model for curriculum and instruction of the gifted differs from the content mastery model in that content is viewed as less important and rarely acts as the organizer for this type of curriculum. Student interest is a mainspring for what "curriculum" will be studied. The nature of the evaluation effort is product-based rather than proficiency-oriented, and the focus is on studying selected topics in-depth rather than moving through a given domain of inquiry in a fast-paced manner.

While the model has worked well in some pull-out programs for the gifted and as a part of a total science program at the secondary level, it does present organizational problems for many schools: critics contend that the focus of this model creates confusion around the curricular scope and sequence of learning at any given level of instruction and creates a need for articulating new process and product dimensions into an adopted scope and sequence continuum for the gifted. Furthermore, the model at the elementary level tends to devalue core content elements in the traditional curriculum, and to overvalue independent learning strategies at that stage of development.

8 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

Nevertheless, it is the curriculum and instructional model most closely allied with the recommendations of national teacher groups in both science and mathematics that tend to favor a student-directed, hands-on, inquiry-based process of problem-solving, where students are engaged in the act of constructing knowledge for themselves.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL MODEL

The epistemological concept model focuses on talented students' understanding and appreciation of systems of knowledge rather than the individual segments of those systems. It reflects a concern for exposing students to key ideas, themes, and principles within and across domains of knowledge so that schemata are internalized for amplification by new examples in the future. The role of the teacher in this model is as questioner, raising interpretive issues for discussion and debate. Students focus their energies on reading, reflecting, and writing. Aesthetic appreciation of powerful ideas in various representational forms is viewed as an important outcome of this model.

The model is very effective with gifted learners for several reasons. First of all, the intellectually gifted child has unusually keen powers to see and understand interrelationships; therefore, conceptual curriculum is useful, for its whole structure is based on constantly interrelating form and content. Concept curriculum is an enrichment tool in the highest sense, for it provides the gifted with an intellectual framework not available in studying only one content area, but rather exposes them to many not covered in traditional curricula. Furthermore, it provides a basis for students' understanding the creative as well as the intellectual process through critically analyzing creative products, and being actively engaged in the creative process itself. And lastly, it provides a context for integrating cognitive and affective objectives into the curriculum. A discussion of ideas evokes feelings; response to the arts involves aesthetic appreciation, and study of literary archetypes creates a structure for self identity.

Many writers in the field of gifted education have advocated the epistemological approach to curriculum for the gifted (Ward, 1961; Hayes-Jacob, 1981; Maker, 1982; Tannenbaum, 1983). And some extant curriculum has been organized around the model at both elementary and secondary levels. The College Board Advanced Placement Program in history (both American and European) as well as their literature and composition programs rely heavily on this curriculum and instructional model.

The Junior Great Books program, Philosophy for Children, and Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) are elementary programs using the approach. Each of these programs stresses the use of Socratic questions to stimulate an intellectual discussion among students on an issue or theme. Creating analogies across a field of inquiry is encouraged, and interdisciplinary thinking is highly valued. Recent curriculum development efforts for the gifted have attempted to utilize the epistemological framework (VanTassel-Baska and Feldhusen, 1981; Gallagher,

Effective Curriculum and Instructional Models for Talented Students 9

1982). And larger curriculum projects in the past, such as CEMREL's mathematics program at the secondary level and the Unified Mathematics program at the middle school level, have utilized a holistic approach to the organization of content.

At the Secondary level, humanities programs have often been the reservoir for the use of this model with talented learners. One approach to framing discussions with the humanities is to structure questions about a work of art (whether it be music, painting, or literature) that asks students to examine an "art" object from a variety of perspectives. For example, the following questions might be posed about a poem:

- 1) What is it? (What's the subject matter?)
- 2) What is it made of? (What is its form?)
- 3) What ideas does it convey? (What does it mean?)
- 4) What is its context? (How would you categorize it historically?)
- 5) How do you relate to it? (What is its personal value?)
- 6) How good is it? (What is your evaluation of its artistic merit?)

Through these several lenses, then, gifted learners can explore the humanities as a collection of creative products assembled by individuals over the centuries, and reflect on their relationship to each other in specified dimensions. Thus appreciation for the arts can be developed through "seeing" them from various points of view.

While the concept-based model of curriculum offers the advantages of a unified view of a field of inquiry often undertaken by scholars in individual disciplines, it requires well-trained teachers to implement it effectively. Teachers need to possess not only in-depth knowledge about one field of inquiry but also must have the capacity to make appropriate connections to other disciplines as well. And there is a need to keep in place a consistent vision around the exploration of concepts. Furthermore, schools have never really known how to treat such curriculum organizationally. At the secondary level, should students receive an English credit for a humanities course or a social studies credit? Should humanities be offered only at senior level as an elective or earlier as a mandatory course? The very strength of this curriculum and instructional model as an integrating force frequently breaks down in the organizational decision-making over "where it fits." As with the other two models discussed, developing a scope and sequence within the epistemological orientation would seem to be necessary to allow for appropriate student exposure and progressive development in the realm of ideas.

The concept model for curriculum and instruction differs considerably from the nature of the previous two models (see Figure 1). It is organized by ideas and themes, not subject matter or process skills. It is a highly interactive model in its instructional context, which contrasts with the more independent modes

10 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

Figure 1 Contrasting Curriculum/Instructional Models for the Gifted

A (content) ↓	B (process/product) ↓	C (concept) ↓
fast-paced	in-depth on selected topics	epistemological
proficiency-based	product based	aesthetics-based
D → P approach	resource-oriented	discussion approach
organized by	organized around	organized by themes and ideas
intellectual content	scientific process	
teacher as facilitator	collaborative model	Socratic method

of instruction used in the other two models. Concern for the nature and structure of knowledge itself is a major underlying tenet. And evaluation of students engaged in this model typically requires evidence of high level aesthetic perceptions and insights rather than content proficiency or a culminating product of high quality.

Implementation of Curriculum and Instructional Models

The explication of these three models may be useful in advancing our understanding of how the confluent approaches to curriculum that are currently advocated might be implemented in the context of school-based programs. Clearly, it is not advantageous to select one model over another when planning appropriate curriculum over a span of years, for each approach responds to different characteristics and needs of gifted learners. Acceleration and in-depth as well as broad-based enrichment opportunities are all valuable for the gifted.

There is a need, however, to consider the nature of separate curriculum areas which may lend themselves more readily to one model than another. And within a population of gifted learners, there may be important differences to consider in relationship to curriculum models. There is a motivational factor that must be considered for certain types of curriculum approaches that involve independent investigations or studying a content area at a fast rate. Learning preferences among talented learners should also be considered. Some gifted students prefer to learn rapidly and go on to more sophisticated work at a higher level; others prefer to examine a problem from all sides and deliberate over it in depth. As Renzulli (1978) has demonstrated, task commitment is a necessary student variable to perform well in the process-product curriculum model. And the concept model may work best with students evidencing high level verbal capacity and broad-based reading behaviors. Figure 2 presents a matrix that matches model type with content organizational issues and salient student characteristics.

The real issue is how best to conceptualize and operationalize the functional utility of these models at different stages of development and in different program organizational models. Figure 3 presents a confluent model of the three curriculum and instructional approaches as they might be viewed within

Figure 2

<i>Model Type</i>	<i>Preferred Content Match</i>	<i>Salient Student Characteristics</i>
A Content	Mathematics (traditional) Foreign Language English Grammar Reading	Independent learner High achievement motivation
B Process/ Product	Science Mathematics (problem-solving orientation) Writing	High interest in single topic Task commitment
C Concept	Humanities Social studies (e.g. history, economics) Literature	High level verbal reasoning skills Broad-based interests and reading behavior

Figure 3 School-Based Curriculum Model Linkages on an Academic Year Cycle

<i>Modifications of Core Curriculum</i>	<i>Extended Core Curriculum</i>	<i>Curriculum Integration</i>
D → P Content Approach	Process/Product Research Approach	Epistemological Concept Approach
A	B	C
Allows for speeded, compressed, economized version of regular curriculum	Allows for development of generic problem finding/problem solving skills in selected curriculum contexts	Allows for idea discussion/generation within and across disciplines

an academic year program at the local school district level. Each model is allotted equal amounts of instructional time and equal focus in a student's program.

While a full-time grouping model would be the most feasible to operationalize this confluent model, it could be considered under other grouping patterns as well, notably resource room and pull-out where regular classroom teachers or other specialists would facilitate models A and B. Model C work then would be reserved for gifted program time.

As with the adaptation of any curriculum model, partial or selective implementation may also be appropriate for individual students at a given stage of development. Students may elect to participate in a special humanities seminar but not elect to engage in accelerated study, for example. However, adaptations in the integrative pattern should be viewed as student-selected alternatives rather than limitations in the school-based program options.

12 Curriculum for Gifted and Talented Students

Effective curriculum and instruction for the gifted has reached a stage of evolution where existing theoretical and research-based models need to be systematically translated into practice at the local level. Competition among these models has dissipated the effect of building a strong differentiated program for the gifted that addresses all of their intellectual needs within the core curriculum and beyond it to all levels of instruction. The synthesis of the content, process-product, and concept models provides a clear direction for meaningful curriculum work.

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