Analytic Teaching in a Gifted Classroom

My teaching situation is a peculiar one — five days a week of teaching five different grade levels of academically gifted students from grades Four through Eight. This past year was my third year of teaching the "Acclaim" program (Accelerated Learning And Individual Motivation) located in Marsh Middle School in Castleberry ISD. The first two years had been good ones, with progress being shown in students in the areas of logic and creative development, the two main goals for the program. But even with using Anita Harnedeck's *Mind Bender* Series, syllogisms, board puzzles, etc., I did not truly feel that my students were gaining a solid grasp of how to approach problems in a logical, systematic reasoning fashion. Overall, I was aware of gaps in their ability to analyze ideas in depth and to express themselves in a verbal or written manner. Where to find a plan, though, that would enhance these abilities and give real direction to their thinking and expressive skills? That was when I learned of the Analytic Teaching course at TWC and enrolled. It was the beginning of a year-long adventure that I feel confident will last far into the future for both my students and myself, and which already has irrevocably changed my style of teaching.

In the six hour graduate level Analytic Teaching course we learned how to develop a Community of Inquiry, a non-threatening group discussion situation where every person's comments and opinions are valued and each is encouraged to explore ideas without great pressure to find a predetermined "right" or "wrong" answer. We learned how to work through the exercises in the syllabus and developed our skills in standardizing ideas into logical order statements. At the end of this course, I was so excited about the possibilities of putting into practice all the new ideas I had gained, I could hardly wait to get started.

In consulting with the faculty of TWC we decided that it might be best, (in spite of my great enthusiasm to start the program in all *five* grade levels), to concentrate on just one of the grades for this first year with Analytic Thinking. The most appropriate grade to start in appeared to be the 5th grade with *Harry Stottlemeier* since there are so *many* new things to get the 4th grade oriented to when they come into the gifted program that they usually need a year just to get familiarized with all the kinds of things that we do. Using the 5th grade as the beginning level for the program, the plan is currently to do chapters 1 - 7 of *Harry* in the 5th grade, then 8 - 14 in the 6th grade. After next year a better decision can then be made as to whether to do *Lisa* or *Suki* with the 7th and 8th grades. It should be interesting to see what levels of skills develop in the children who will have been in the program for four years.

The actual beginning of the use of Analytic Thinking with my 5th grade started the third week of October. Students in Castleberry ISD are not admitted to the gifted program until they have been in their regular classrooms for one full six-week period. This is to enable them to get adjusted to their new grade level before adding an additional burden of one full day out of class with the attendant work-load. It also allows time for us to test the students individually as to their qualifications to be in the program as well as allows time for teachers to get to know their students and to recommend them for more advanced or enriched studies. After allowing for the first week, which is really just one day of class, we began reading aloud the first chapter of *Harry Stottlemeier* which is about a student (possibly fifth grade) of average or slightly above average ability that most children in this grade level find fairly easy to identify with. Immediately, the class found themselves enthralled with the idea of Harry's Rule about reversing true sentences. Lisa's Rule was quickly picked up and the students got involved in making up sentences of their own for examples of the rules.

Since these are "gifted" students, one of the main characteristics that seem to hold true for all of them is that they display large amount of intense curiosity. They could hardly stand the fact that they had to wait one whole week just to find out what would happen with Harry. This quality in itself has probably been one of the greatest assets to the group discussions we have had this year in that this type of child simply loves to question and discuss and ask "why?" about nearly everything that presents itself. Their imaginations fairly brim-over with original ways of looking at things and they come up with questions I would never dream of conceiving, especially in the "what if?" category. There were times, however, when this asset could be somewhat handicapping in that, unless I exercised some directive control, they would tend to ramble way off the intended discussion. This was not always bad in that we discovered some interesting side-roads, but that would not always accomplish our purpose at hand.

One thing that was somewhat difficult for me was in this area of controlling the conversation. I found that I often tended to be too "heavy-handed" in clarifying their statements or just in speaking too much of my own opinion. (This did improve, however, as the year went on.) When I let them know that the conversation did not need to always go through me, like it usually did in the rest of the day and that this "thinking time" was to really be a conversation, the children were delighted at their new-found freedom. They still had a hard time breaking the habit of raising their hands, but once I showed them that all they needed to do was to observe courtesy in waiting their turn and not interrupt while someone else was speaking, the conversation flowed more easily.

A helpful interim step in the transition from hand raising to free conversation was the idea of raising just one finger in order to let it be known by the group that you had an idea that you wanted to voice. Another technique which seemed to work well was to divide the group of sixteen students up into four groups, give the topic to the entire class and then let them brainstorm before coming back into the group at large. This seemed to facilitate more interaction, plus giving the more reticent children a greater chance to speak. Also, after trying out their ideas on a less threatening group, it gave some more confidence to speak as well

as making them a little more intimately involved in the conversation.

The first day of our initial sessions with *Harry Stottlemeier* got off to a really good start. My faculty advisor from TWC was present on our first class with *Harry* and I have to admit to feeling some stress that this project might not go off as well as I had imagined in my head. The children were certainly excited and eager as I had conveyed my excitement to them for this program, and it was even more special to have someone from a college to come to watch them perform. My fears, however, were quickly dispelled as we read Chapter One and got into the idea of Harry's Rule and Lisa's Rule. The children were genuinely interested in these new personalities that were presented and seem to have a good grasp of who they were and what they were like. The most exciting thing for me personally was that they so quickly took hold of the idea of putting statements into a standardized form and could readily understand that: 1) a true "all" sentence when reversed becomes false (Harry's Rule) and 2) a true "no" sentence when reversed remains true (Lisa's Rule). I think I was practically astounded because they had picked it up faster than I had in the college course and had now "discovered" these new rules along with Harry and Lisa with practically very little help on my part. The fact, of course, that they had been so obviously successful in my eyes as well as theirs, added greatly to their enthusiasm for pursuing further chapters and more new ideas.

The next step in beginning our Analytic Thinking program (which could have easily been the first) was to test all the students with The New Jersey Test of Reasoning Skills. After having had the introduction to *Harry* that morning, they were eager to take whatever other necessary steps there were to becoming more involved in this interesting new adventure. I really, at this point, have no idea how well my students scored, but somehow feel that, because they tend to be among our most logical thinkers in the school, perhaps they did well as a group on their first session of testing. Next year I believe I would like to have another group in the school, perhaps even some who are of a nearly equivalent ability level to also take the test as a control group to be able to measure what improvement may have been made, as opposed to those who did not take the program. Much of what we do is geared to developing thinking and creative skills, so even at that it may be hard to sort out what specific part Analytic Thinking is playing. Personally, I do feel that this year's 5th grade has somewhat of an edge in thinking skills ove the 5th grade that graduated last year without *Harry Stottlemeier.*

Our second session with *Harry* was greeted with "Ms. Henderson, I just love Harry Stottlemeier!" This was Jennifer Ashton's opinion and has remained so all year. Already at this point Harry seemed like a real person to them and they began to speculate just what Harry looked like or if he reminded them of someone inside or outside the class. Something which really seemed to delight them at this point was that Tony found a practical usage for applying Harry's Rule in a difficult situation that he had encountered with his dad. The problem was that Tony was good in math and since Tony's dad assertively stated that all engineers are good in math that should make Tony destined to be an engineer which he did not want to be. After discussing his dilemma with Harry, Tony pointed out that to reverse a true statement, i.e., "all people who are engineers are people who are good in math" makes the new statement false. The interesting thing for me was to note how the students' eyes began to light up as they identified with Tony and it was exciting for them to realize that this process might actually have some very practical benefit. I felt somewhat like I had begun to arm these children, who like all humans experience some insecurities, with a skill for handling their individual worlds. The happy discovery gave us all a very warm and special sense of accomplishment.

By the third class session all students were standardizing sentences very well. They had learned all six modifiers that could mean the equivalent of the word "all" and thoroughly seemed to enjoy their chance to demonstrate how well they could make a sentence fit a standard form. Just a few in the class, however, seemed to want to leave the predicate out of the sentence, so we did some more drilling on the board leaving two blanks to fit the nouns into. After this point, it never seemed to be a problem again.

Moving into chapter three, one of the incidents that the students had quite an interested response to was Fran's "leaping" episode in which she reacts to an unjust criticism by the teacher by leaping gracefully from desk to desk. The responses ranged from those of puzzled surprise to some bit of admiration for what they perceived as standing up for herself. In this discussion in particular and all those after this point that involved the students emotionally (so that they were recalling situations that they had felt were unfair), we had a very lively interaction. Many wanted to relate situations that they had felt were unfair, and so became quite involved. Many also wanted to share incidents that they could identify with Fran's feelings. Here is a point where I began to see that this type of sharing was not always productive. Many times this type of identification merely brought out story after story that children wanted to talk about, but unless some type of direction was interjected, a conclusion was not always gained. I found that most of the time the children needed some guidance to get them to analyze "why" a thing had happened, or "how" it could be prevented, or "what" they had learned from the experience. When the story-sharing did go on to reach some type of "closure" or conclusion, it gave us a feeling of satisfaction that we had really accomplished something or gained an insight about life. Beyond this, we also began to feel a greater closeness to each other as we more openly shared the realities of our lives and felt a greater confidence that we could do this securely without threat of being put down. Not every conversation was idyllic, of course, because some things, situations or opinions, might seem humorous or ridiculous and children could not resist the temptation to tease, but overall it has usually been with a good natured type of playfulness.

The exercise on "Ambiguity" in Chapter Four was one of our best sessions. Somehow the gifted child seems to absolutely thrive on words that can turn into puns and a good deal of hilarity was involved in this discussion. But, overall

I felt that students came away with a greater awareness of the words that they use and that others may not always understand what they think they are saying. In the exercise on "Jumping to Conclusions," we not only had practice with words that can take on double meaning, but also touched on how easily we can form incorrect opinions from appearances and not necessarily from reality. At this age many of the children are just beginning their first real steps into maturing out of childhood into the beginning stages of adolescence. Along with this comes the first realizations of the differences between fact and fantasy, between dreams and reality and many admitted that it is more fun and in a way more safe to hold on to some of the magical feelings about life. From here we touched on the idea that even in the face of solid realities of life there can still be a great deal of beauty and wonder for both the child at heart and the level-headed, factual philosopher.

In Chapter Five, we encountered a good discussion on jelly beans, the idea being that if you took three jelly beans from a bag that were all brown, you could not say for sure that all the rest were brown and also you could not say for certain that they were any other color. This allowed us to touch briefly upon prediction and probability.

One of the more recent topics that the children really got deeply involved in was in Chapter Five where Mark, Harry and Maria were discussing how school would be if children ran it. Opinions ran strong and feelings ran high, mainly I suppose because this was their real world they were talking about and also\because they seemed to have so many negative impressions of school. The class agreed with the children in the story that school ought to be a place that you want to come to, where you feel challenged to think and learn how to think and solve problems. Personally, it felt good to know that they love the Analytic Thinking sessions for this very reason and feel that coming to Acclaim is one of the most helpful and enjoyable things they do all week.

One of the major highlights for the students was the experience of being videotaped by the TWC media department. The topic I had chosen for this special experience was the Mind/Brain issue, i.e., "Is the mind the same thing as the brain or are they overlapping entities or separate entities?" Basically, the students seemed to agree that no one could know for sure, but most seemed to feel that thinking could somehow be connected with one's soul and therefore it must be a function which included the brain but was more than just the physical matter.

The experience of being videotaped certainly heightened their enthusiasm but also their nervousness and self-consciousness, as well as my own. After awhile, however, most of us were able to forget the camera because we got so involved in the issue at hand. Somehow, though, I felt that we had slipped back into the old mode of too much of the conversation traveling through me and I think this was perhaps because they were afraid of speaking out at the wrong time and "messing up" the taping session. All agreed at the end of the time, though, that it was one of the most fun experiences with *Harry* that they had had and just getting to come to a "big college place" was really exciting for them.

In summary of the year, I feel it was a good beginning with the program. My fifth graders are looking forward to the next seven chapters next year and to find out "how it all comes out." My plan for the years to come is to continue to divide *Harry* into a two year program and then, as mentioned before, to add *Suki* and *Lisa* to grades Seven and Eight. Some of the things I will want to pay more careful attention to or to actually change next year are:

1) Rearrange the room so that we are sitting in a circular pattern for better flow of ideas.
2) Do two short sessions instead of one long one, possibly 30 minutes for a story session in the morning and 30 minutes for exercises in the afternoon. (This would be to keep them fresher and aid their attention span.)
3) Reinforce the idea that the teacher does not have to be referred to by simply keeping totally silent for longer times during the discussions.
4) Require students to justify their reasons better instead of allowing for short sentence responses as they are often prone to do.
5) Emphasize the need to stay away from always relying on story examples for their justifications and pressing toward more specific logical reasons.

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