

**Title:**

**How do I continue to improve my practice while continuing to live my values of inclusion and equality, to ensure that learning is a positive and engaging process, enabling talents and gifts to unfold as a natural part of the learning journey , particularly for learners who are disadvantaged by cultural, emotional and physical barriers to learning?**

Gifted and Talented Education: An Inclusive Approach Module, Liverpool Hope University  
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At school I dearly wanted to act. The system required those who wanted to audition, to put up their hand. Shyness and lack of confidence in my own (untested) talents prevented me. I never acted throughout my school life.

Maddie started at her secondary school 5 years ago. Her mother soon received a letter from her school saying that Maddie was gifted and talented in drama and was being given extra classes. 5 years on, she has just gained an A\* at GCSE drama and has enrolled at a 6<sup>th</sup> form college to do A Level drama. Was Maddie influenced by her label of gifted and talented and being nurtured and encouraged through her secondary schooling? Would her passion for drama have occurred naturally?

Huxtable argues that no one can know or appreciate their talents without being given the opportunity to try out the necessary skills of any craft (Huxtable 2012). Young people need to develop a 'growth mindset' (Dweck 2006)) in order to have enthusiasm and ambition, to make progress towards what they are learning, through practicing and learning by mistakes, in order to become skilled. As Coyle (2009) would describe it, 'deep practice'.

The question that has continued to excite me over almost 40 years of facilitating learning in a wide range of settings, is how do I continue to improve my practice, to retain my values of inclusion and equality to ensure that learning is a positive and engaging process that allows talents and gifts to unfold as a natural part of the learning journey, particularly for those disadvantaged by cultural, emotional and physical barriers to learning.

I want to enhance the learning experience of pupils, not just in my own practice but to change the hearts and minds of educators and clear the barriers to listening, understanding, caring and responding. My passion has been to engage meaningfully in any learning encounter, especially with those who may feel excluded, inadequate, or not valued. I have been exploring effective communication in the context of education and lifelong learning.

This assignment is a reflection on how my intentions have become part of the world: 'the unavoidable cleavage between intention and action', where our actions, when they 'become part of the world', reveal our intentions that may have been unclear or unknown to us until that appearance (Banhabib 1992). Over time, it has felt like a

compulsion for me to take action to improve my practice and that of others, because of the growing sense of myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989). My intention is to bring justice to those young learners through researching effective ways to involve them in their own learning.

As my awareness grew of being a living contradiction as a teacher, I began to realise that I must take responsibility for finding my own solutions. Long experience in an education system that carelessly reinforced children's belief in their own worthlessness led me to research, identify and practice innovative methods that will motivate and engage learners and to share these methods with other practitioners. This has been important to my sense of purpose and authenticity (Crofts 2003) and given importance to my own methodological inventiveness (Dadds and Hart 2001).

From my first days of teaching, I sensed the injustice for some learners, many of whom had barriers to learning, of being left to gradually fail and disengage. My discomfort with these observations caused me to reflect on how inclusive my own and others practice was and I found that it fell short of engaging many disadvantaged young people. Consequently, I began to seek ways to positively engage through effective communication. I began to refine my practice, to focus on the responses (or lack of) from each learner to my teaching style and to learn through trial and error, what encouraged engagement.

I am 'reflecting in action' (Schön 1983), because my research is not dependent on established theories- although I make reference to a great number in the course of my narrative. Schön would describe my research as in the practice context, constructing fresh theory that is unique to my own practice.

I want to make public my talent, experience and knowledge as an educator. I am offering my own talents as an active learner as a gift to fellow enquirers. I am using this opportunity to reflect, describe, inform and deepen my own understanding of the influences on my practice

What has deepened in the course of writing this assignment is my own understanding of talents and gifts in an educational sense. Huxtable (2007) suggests that every learner has an aptitude for something and that the educator needs to be alongside (Pound 2003) the learner to recognise, honour and work on that aptitude, helping them to recognise it in themselves:

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=dNBGxssfdvo>).

In Maddie's case, there was early recognition of her aptitude for acting, which enabled her to learn and practice her craft and to star in most school drama productions. In my case, I would be 23 before I nervously set foot on a stage, to discover rather later than Maddie, that I also had an aptitude for acting. I learned my craft and continued for 20 years to 'tread the boards' as well as write and direct productions. I always made sure that I included those young people who like me, would not have put up their hand.

This assignment describes some of the critical incidents (Tripp 1993) along that journey. Tripp describes a critical incident as:

Critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgement we make, and the basis of that judgement is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident (p.8) I agree with Tripp when he suggests that it is ourselves who have to bear responsibility for the interpretation of our practice as autonomous professional practitioners in the form of critical incidents while acknowledging the necessity of having our analyses verified and evaluated by others (Tripp p.67).

The critical incidents narrated in this assignment as appendices and within the text are perceptions of my practice from my own perspective. The events described have been given significance through my reflections of their importance to my own learning. My analysis of events are personal and open to wider interpretation by peers 'critical friends' (Ingvarson 1986) and other readers. 'Analysis is a very personal affair' (Tripp 1993 p.66)

I have undertaken my own action research and analysis of my evolving practice as educator, adviser, trainer and community worker, experimenting with different ways to communicate messages. I want to promote research into improving education to serve the public good and contribute to the knowledge base by offering my own analysis of effective communication in a variety of settings. This assignment is a response to the key questions that I have set myself:

- As an educator, what messages can I convey to learners that will encourage, invite and ignite them into active participation in their own learning?
- What steps am I taking to ensure that learners can access and interpret my messages?
- What methods can I employ to enable the message to flow both ways effectively?

The questions that I search answers to were as a result of becoming acutely aware of some young learners growing towards adulthood, mishearing or misunderstanding messages, because of barriers to learning. So my quest has been to find strategies to enable learners to understand and respond to the messages issued to them.

McGough (1976) wrote a poem that illustrates perfectly ('First Day at School') (Appendix 1). in the most poignant and concise way, almost every child's first experience of formal education, arriving in school and trying to decipher all the conflicting messages that they receive from their educators, such as 'waiting for the bell to go', to go to the 'hall'(so unlike the one inside their front door at home) and to learn that 'the quiet table goes first' and 'noisy tables go last'. At this early stage, educators will make every effort to correct misinformation and explain contradictions.

I read this poem as my introduction when speaking as a tutor or presenter at conferences, CPD teacher and other practitioner courses. I offer it as an invitation for participants to begin to reflect on their own practice. I ask them to consider how they

engage effectively with all learners and perhaps to consider their communication as simply sending and receiving messages.

I have pondered whether there is a point when educators assume that sufficient messages have been 'sent' and become increasingly frustrated with those learners who still haven't 'got it'? Is this when we resort to labels of 'disruptive' 'poor concentration', 'Special Educational Needs (SEN) as an explanation of why messages are not being understood by some pupils? Coyle (2009) in his studies of learning, suggests 3 essential 'ingredients': "ignition", when a person is inspired to want to try something: a "mentor" who can offer support and guidance: and finally, what Coyle describes as "deep practice", when a person focuses deeply on what they are doing right as well as their mistakes.

As educators we can tread gently, listening and watching as we go, checking that our messages are understood by everyone and conveyed in a variety of ways to enable every child to understand. We can nurture these precious learners who start their school life full of intrinsic motivation (Syed 2010) obliging us with whatever we ask of them, believing everything we tell them and soaking up knowledge like sponges. Sadly, as time goes by, some children will be labelled as 'problems' when they find our messages confusing or impenetrable. We may inadvertently trample on their dreams and hopes, demand their attention when they cannot concentrate and show irritation when they cannot grasp our possibly limited and limiting attempts to convey our messages to them.

This assignment is about offering learners ways of understanding and participating in their learning. I aim through the methods I use, to 'ignite' that initial spark of interest that Coyle (2009) suggests is the essential first step. Without that 'ignition', any further stages will be hard going for teacher and learner. I want to place more value on the learning that takes place between ignition/ instruction and final outcome/ product. I believe that the time taken in learning, which I am calling 'the place in between' is frequently undervalued as a result of the OFSTED outcome-driven pressured environment.

Through this narrative, I am providing evidence of how a shift of focus to 'the place in between' should be given value, independent of the judged success or otherwise of a completed task. It will require taking away the hurry of reaching the end quickly, changing the culture that places the main value of a lesson being a tangible result e.g. a painting, an essay, a page of completed Maths. It will enable learners to value the richness of the time spent in being absorbed, experimenting, experiencing and reflecting as having value for its own sake, regardless of whether the eventual outcome/task/ result is deemed 'a success' by any criteria matching or pre-ordained standards.

A recent short ride on a steam train has provided a clear example of 'the place in between' (Appendix 2). I am offering this analogy as an accessible way to explain the point about being in the moment and appreciating the process/ journey.  
( video link: [SVGDxEQH8k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVGDxEQH8k)).

My examples from my own practice as critical incidents (Tripp 1993) demonstrate how learners in a variety of settings, have taken up the challenge to engage in the

process and put trust in me as their facilitator and themselves as taking a journey to discover their gifts and talents.

I feel that young people deserve to experience a wide range of teaching and learning styles and methods which will accommodate different levels of learning needs and to be encouraged to participate in their own learning. My practice has involved seeking effective ways to enable these children, young people and adults to decipher messages, to feel invited to respond, to have a voice, to be valued, to be included.

During my role as adviser for Personal and Social Education (PSE), I saw the opportunity to learn and practice the new skills of 'active learning' or 'developmental group work' (Button 1974). I could see the potential for developing a range of effective methods for engagement and encouraging participation in learning. I have continued to use participative methods to engage any audience.

I have offered several accounts of examples from my practice as critical incidents, including a description of a peer led conference demonstrating the effective use of developmental group work (Appendix 3). I describe the culmination of working with groups of young people to train them in active learning methods, their developing the expertise and confidence to deliver the workshops with their peers and the impact on many of the peer leaders as they took up the challenge and felt equipped to take responsibility, lead their peers and achieved their goals.

Feuerstein et al (1979) describe three artificially grouped mental activities: 'input' (gathering information) 'elaboration' (efficiently using information to find solutions) and 'output' (doing tasks and communicating findings/solutions to self and others). The peer led conference preparation could be seen as following Feuerstein's model.

My interest for this assignment is on the importance of the manner of that input as the most essential activity to achieve 'ignition' in the learner. For unless the information is understood by the receiver, it will not be processed effectively and finding solutions during elaboration (the place in between) will be limited or absent. This, leads all too frequently to unacceptable or disappointing outcomes for both teacher and learner.

My own career path began when I qualified as a secondary art teacher after five years training at art schools. Dweck would describe my ambition as a growth mindset (Dweck 2006) as I was not identified as being gifted and talented at school but was self motivated and loved drawing and painting. Throughout my childhood, hours were spent daily, lost in the process of drawing that was like a Zen meditation (Franck 1973). I invented characters and stories about people which I drew rather than wrote. I would become fully absorbed in the moment, as Coyle (2009) would describe undertaking 'deep practice'. This is when I discovered for myself 'the place in between'. I want to enable others to reach that place through the values expressed through my practice.

My mentor (Coyle 2009) was an uncle who encouraged and took an interest in me, introducing me to art books and encouraging me to persevere. Feuerstein (1979) would describe him as a mediator, the significant adult who inspired me by taking an interest, encouraging me and stretching me further:

'Ideally, we would be nurtured and encouraged first by our nuclear family and then by ever-widening circles of friends, teachers, well wishers. As young artists, we need and want to be acknowledged for our attempts and efforts as well as for our achievements and triumphs. Unfortunately many artists never receive this critical early encouragement. As a result, they may never know that they are artists at all (Cameron 1994 p. 26).

I want to provide that critical encouragement. My medium has been predominantly art but this philosophy is transferable across any discipline. The methods that I have employed are generic and can be effective in 'igniting' creativity and then inspiring confidence and ambition through encouragement and practice.

As an art teacher, I have always given value to creating the environment for young people to become absorbed in their creative practice and to believe in their own ability to improve their skills and to find satisfaction in 'staying in the moment'. Gregory (2006) states: 'That's the point: to record this particular moment, this 'place in between', not something generic. If you approach it with attitude, you will create something unique. Reaching that place is just a matter of concentration and attention'. (Gregory 2006 p.54).

I am including a video of my two year old grandson as he discovers the joy of paint. This incident communicates the embodied values that I express in my educational relationships, which I am seeking to live as fully as possible. In interpreting the example of my grandson painting, I am able to communicate the meanings of my energy flow (life-affirming) values as I hold myself accountable to them, lived as fully as possible.

<http://youtu.be/jzyhfH4uIIY>

I have been observing his enthusiasm for his own creativity and how uninhibited he is in expressing himself and is unhindered by instruction, comment or praise. I have interpreted his curiosity and exploration of the paint and his mother's desire to influence what he is doing. Jesse had no interest in the paper, only the paints on his fingers. He studied and felt the paint, clearly loving the tactile nature of the liquid and fascinated by the colours changing beneath his fingers. His mother was keen for him to follow the convention of making marks with the paint on paper. She demonstrated how to do hand prints, coaxing and encouraging him to follow her example. He wasn't looking or listening; he was lost in the experience 'the place in between'.

How can we measure learning when there is no tangible product to judge? If we repeated the exercise, we can observe the knowledge that he would bring to a second experience with paint and paper. His mother wanted those handprints, possibly to pin on the wall as an outcome of her son's early artistic skills. Jesse showed no interest in making marks on the paper. The only time he looked at the paper was to 'wipe' some paint off his hands. This video demonstrates my understanding of 'the place in between'.

I have presented it as a critical incident (Tripp 1993), by interpreting Jesse's response to paint and giving it significance for that purpose. I have offered my

interpretation of the significance of this film to offer an explanation of my interest and ongoing concern that subjective judgement of creativity by significant others, can lead to decreased motivation, reluctance to engage and a total lack of confidence in one's own ability. I want to make public my embodied knowledge and experience which has led me to the conclusions above.

As Snow (2001) writes:

'If we had agreed-upon procedures for transforming knowledge based on personal experiences of practice into 'public' knowledge, analogous to the way a researcher's private knowledge is made public through peer-review and publication, the advantages would be great'.

I am using my personal experiences to make my private knowledge public, demonstrating the inclusional and relational values with my grandson and my understanding of the expression of Jesse's creativity within the living boundaries between teachers (mother and grandmother) and pupil (Jesse). These are the values that I wish to see expressed as fully as possible in educational contexts.

My early work as an adviser and trainer encouraged me to write a resource for early years workers entitled 'Valuing Cultures'. I had developed and frequently delivered a course of the same name for an anti racist charity. I wanted to challenge myself to see whether I could give instructions on paper for others to practice active learning methods. I have included a video of myself describing the content of the pack:

1481EAcoPOU 'Valuing Cultures Description'.

I want to demonstrate the bridge between the written word on paper and an enthusiastic author (myself), on film, using language, expression and images from the pages to communicate my message of confidence in the methods and content for changing hearts and minds and taking learners to 'the place in between'.

My recent reflections on the importance of valuing the process in learning have come through tutoring across a wide range of learning settings. At (Appendix 4) I have described a two hour workshop that I delivered recently at an Apex conference for young people. I created a climate of trust and participation for learning and observed confidence grow and group work develop, over a short period of time while demonstrating to the learners methods which they could use in the future, to take responsibility for delivering their own workshops with their peers and conduct their own research.

My long experience of art teaching over many years has led me to believe that culturally, we are bound by expectations of art being about creating a product to go on the wall, to be hung, to be double mounted and displayed. Subjective judgements are often made by educators and other close adults, some work (products) are selected, praised and displayed without rational explanation for the learning group, the rest is cast aside, not through condemnation of being judged as 'poor' quality but by neglectful ignoring or silence.

I have so frequently seen the 'hush' descend on an individual or group, as their ignition takes them to the 'place in between' where they exist in the moment, absorbed and recognising the value of their own creativity. It is sad that learners are assessed and assess themselves at a very early point in their creative 'career' judged as not gifted or talented, creative or artistic. This is a travesty.

Are we using limited criteria to make judgements and is there always the need to judge at all? Are our careless judgements the cause of young minds losing confidence, ceasing to feel that intrinsic delight of creativity because of the messages they receive from us? As my grandson demonstrates (see 'Jesse Painting' video) we can learn from watching very young children delight in making marks with paint or Play dough, for the feel, the experience and the joy of creating.

A further study of my grandson demonstrates how we can misunderstand their messages to us when we try to interpret small children at play. Jesse asked his aunt to cut out many Play dough boy and girl shapes with the shape cutters. His aunt obliged but was dismayed to see that he took each play dough 'person' and squashed it on the roof of a toy car. So his aunt told him that there was no point in her making the people for him if he was just going to squash each one on the car. She told him that the game was over and she was going to peel off the pile of pink dough and put it away.

Jesse screeched in panic and intervened to protect all the passengers who were of course on top of the car for him to give them a ride. The adult needed to see the representations of people as perfect cut shapes, for Jesse he knew what they were and didn't need to 'see' them anymore. We had missed the point. A heap of squashed play dough to an adult but 'the place in between' of quiet imagination of a two year olds inventiveness.



**Jesse's play dough passengers having a ride in the car**

There are few inhibitions at nursery school or in the reception class so it is sad that by the time learners arrive at secondary school, they have a mixture of enthusiasm and anticipation in the art room, already carrying a preset notion of how 'good at art' or 'rubbish at art' (the usual expressed language) that they feel. By the age of 11 their embodied knowledge of art experiences will have already determined a fixed or growth mindset (Dweck 2008).

I have taken another example from my practice which focuses on the experience of running a day workshop for young people on Batik (Appendix 5). I have much embedded knowledge of the art and craft of Batik gained from both practicing the skills myself and of teaching students, including art teachers and PGCE students over many years. In this example, I describe my facilitation style which is to engage the learners immediately, invite them to participate in their own learning and to offer messages of hope and encouragement. I believe that this narrative demonstrates

how learners can be encouraged to value the process of learning and become engrossed in 'the place in between'.

Amongst educators and parents, there is a belief that encouragement and praise will inspire and motivate. Syed (2010) looks at examples from Dweck (2006) and suggests 'that we should praise effort, not talent; that we should emphasise how abilities can be transformed through application; that we should teach others and ourselves to see challenges as learning opportunities rather than threats; that we should interpret failure not as an indictment but as an opportunity'. Syed describes this as 'growth mindset' where the learner has an attitude to learning that keeps him motivated and practicing.

Syed describes the Florida tennis academy where aspiring tennis stars learn the growth mindset to endlessly practice towards perfection and see opportunities to improve through every poor shot experience. While accepting Syed's observations, I am left wondering how much recognition of talent, praise and encouragement the young tennis player received prior to gaining a place at the academy. My guess is that those young people showed potential, were selected and encouraged and (more than likely) praised for their talent for years before reaching academy status.

My research is about how we can encourage every child to believe in their own potential, to develop a growth mindset and to be motivated intrinsically through being valued and praised for their effort, able to see learning as a journey and for the process of learning to be valued for its own sake - 'the place in between'.

I am interested in the cohort that would never have reached the Florida academy because their potential is untapped either through circumstances or self belief. Syed describes the coach's philosophy as encouraging the growth mindset. In Feuerstein's language, this would be the mediator, the important person who generates enthusiasm, trust and ambition. I have sought to find ways to inspire young people to become motivated to learn, to focus on self improvement and performance rather than comparing or being compared to others.

I see the developmental methods (my 'tools') that I use in my practice as an essential ingredient in successful engagement. I have demonstrated through the critical incidents in my practice, the evidence of the effectiveness of participatory methods. I have used the descriptions from the incidents in the appendices, to make sense and describe the process that enables a facilitator to engage an audience instantly, to draw them in to participation and to maintain the engagement in order for learning to take place.

This is as a result of the inclusive nature of the process but is also about the level of sensitivity of the practitioner (mentor or mediator) and their sense of place and time-understanding intuitively where to invite, engage, observe, stand back and encourage in equal measure to provide a dynamic environment to effectively engage the learner. Much will depend on the quality of the facilitator's initial communication to the group, the invitation that is embodied within the body language and verbal messages and the ability to communicate instruction clearly. Participatory learning methods offer so much including the ability to reach out to the child at the back who

is silent or staring out of the window, disengaged or distracting his neighbour in order to move away from a place that is anticipated to hold discomfort.

I have offered a further example of running a series of workshops for young Somali women on 'Developing A Strong Identity' (Appendix 6). This demonstrates how the simple use of card and string can engage any group and that the ability to 'go with the flow' can take learners to 'the place in between' where the process becomes the value. I have included in Appendix 6, the PowerPoint presentation that I gave at the EU Conference on 'Poverty and Social Exclusion' as a demonstration of the flow of ideas, discussions and activities that were ignited by the participative methods and focus on the process of learning.

### **Conclusion:**

In this assignment, I have described how I have continued to improve my practice while living my values of inclusion and equality, and ensured that learning is a positive and engaging process. I have endeavoured to find ways to enable talents and gifts to unfold as a natural part of the journey of learning, particularly for learners who are disadvantaged by cultural, emotional and physical barriers to learning.

I have reflected on my experience as an educator, trainer, adviser and grandmother to enrich my account of a lifelong journey of living my values to the full, to inform my own understanding and that of fellow enquirers.

I have responded to my own questions, providing examples of how I convey encouraging, inviting and igniting messages through the active participation methods that I use which involve them in their own learning.

I have described the steps that I take to ensure my messages are accessible and I have described the methods that I employ to enable the message to flow both ways effectively such as card sorting and continuums.

I have developed and offered my own perspective on the concepts of gifts and talents as applied to inclusive provision. I have critically analysed my own unique inclusive style, developed out of years of living my values of justice and equality, to make valid judgements on the educational influence and positive impact on learners. I have critically explored the importance and validity of inclusive provision as a human right, describing how encouraging a growth mindset and accessible methods for engagement and participation can unlock potential.

I have shared my knowledge, experience, understanding and skills as practitioner in and out of formal education. I have collected and included critical incidents (Tripp 1993) as examples to illustrate my interpretation of meaningful events, in order to enable me to work alongside learners in any setting, as a gift. I offer these as validated explanations of the educational influences on the learning of pupils.

I have acknowledged that the evolution of my practice has occurred through the influences of many theorists from Button's 'Active Learning, to Dweck's theory of Mindsets, the pedagogies of which I have embraced, refined and embodied in my practice.

I have demonstrated how my practice has evolved as a result of sometimes finding myself in work settings as a living contradiction, driving me forward to create further imagined possibilities with the same strong desire to change and improve the lives of learners. This has kept me searching, researching, experimenting and delivering practice that pushes the boundaries of my own and other learners' experience.

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