

Jennifer L. Groman
Year Three Review Reflection for 2017-2020

Reflection on Teaching

The continued growth of a teacher is anchored in her sense of purpose, held strong by her openness to experience and ideas, and bears fruit through her responsiveness to feedback. I have studied my Annual Review reflections for Year One and Year Two to determine how I have grown as a teacher, how I have adapted the coursework (especially to a fully online format), and how I had been responsive to student comments to improve content, activities, and overall interactions. My three-year focus has been three-fold: improving the **applicability** of the coursework to students' teaching (and sometimes parenting) lives; adding richness to the **interactions** within the course and with me; and aligning the courses with applicable local, state, and national **standards**.

Teachers take coursework to gain knowledge. However, if that knowledge does not translate into classroom improvement, the education has realized only half its worth. Comments I see most often from students either acknowledge how the coursework has given them practical strategies to meet their students' needs or request that more attention be given to practical applications they can use right away. In face-to-face coursework I would often end a theoretical discussion with a debriefing where students shared their thoughts on how the content or concepts we had been talking about might be used in their classroom or might change practice. This is more of a challenge with online coursework. With that in mind, my focus has been on creating a balance between theoretical, foundational knowledge and practical, strategy-based applications and models. This includes an increased focus on students' philosophy of teaching and their place in the field of gifted education. It has been my experience in K-12 education that Gifted Intervention Specialists are often asked to explain terms like differentiation, gifted, service, or creative thinking ability. They are often challenged with, "but aren't all children gifted?" and, "I think gifted education is elitist." It is powerful and confident self-knowledge only that will allow the GIS to share and support her beliefs. Time spent exploring our own personal philosophies - our "Why" statements - manifests in confident, open teachers who maintain collegiality despite differences in opinion.

Students seem to be confident in my enthusiasm and knowledge, this is an overarching theme from course evaluations. However, with the move to online coursework, I see students who want deeper interactions with one another, requesting hybrid and options for face-to-face meetings. They find online discussions to be vapid (as do I) and difficult to navigate (as do I), adding comparatively little to their knowledge for the time and energy of accessing and writing posts. My growth as a teacher in this area involved trial and error - I offered an optional Saturday session on campus in Summer, 2019 - and 16 students came! I offered the same session in Fall, 2019, with two students halfheartedly agreeing to attend. I opened Padlet for sharing and discussion in Fall, 2019, and the engagement of students with one another has been phenomenal. It is a slow process, observing interactions, listening to students, and making small adjustments to improve the overall impact of the work.

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When coursework moved to the online format, I also found more students commenting that I was less than available, something I had never considered. I offer email support at any time, and students have my cell number if they become panicked over an assignment (which is not unusual with graduate students). But being available, I am learning, is more than simply hoping students come to me. It has required more monitoring of individual students than I usually do, and making specific contact early when they seem to be lost, missing assignments, or not engaging. It has required that I balance my day work to allow taking a few of my newly-found “open” evenings (where I am not driving all over Ohio for class!) and making time for online video sessions and drop-in office hours. Teachers know that when we make real, personal connections with students, we can have more of an impact. I have just had to learn that there are more ways to do that - and powerful ways to do that - which have yet to be explored.

Finally, as the Gifted Intervention Specialist endorsement protocol became OAE-exam based, I found myself stretched beyond my philosophical foundation. I don't believe in predicting success with a standardized test - in children, adolescents, or adults. So it was important for me personally to find a way to embrace the positive aspects of this new directive and make it work - for the program and for students. To do that I listened without judgment, something that can often be a challenge to me. I listened to ODE, I listened and worked with Pearson (probably one of the more challenging times in these three years), I listened to colleagues in higher education, and I listened to students. Frankly, I listened to students the most, and I attempted to look at the process from their eyes. I have found that incorporating standards - the OAE framework (which helps them prepare for a test), the NAGC/CEC standards (which give students and me a great deal of structure for planning practical lessons and considering multiple facets of gifted education), the Ashland University SLOs (which give me a common language within the institution), and the ODE Operating Standards competencies (which, except its lack of a mention of creativity, focus on the basic components of gifted education) - does not need to be the only consideration. I can still incorporate aspects I believe in - teaching from the heart, flexible and responsive course content and activities, and reflective work. I tell students that standards do not need to confine them, and I am now learning that they do not need to confine me.

Reflection on Scholarship

I believe that the continued growth of a scholar is a merging of the discipline of her mind and time, the culture of her passions and experiences, and the hopefulness of new works in the field. My research agenda includes creativity studies, transpersonal psychology, teacher identity, and giftedness.

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Discipline

In their youth, musicians are taught the value of daily practice sessions. Scales, arpeggios, and etudes make up the repertoire of mastery – as does the effective use of the time spent, as a musician would say, “in the woodshed” practicing. Joining the Ashland Research and Writing Community in my second semester at Ashland, I found structure to my scholarship role. The group’s mantra is that the use of Brief Daily Sessions rather than binge writing moves a researcher and writer forward using time as a partner, not an enemy. From that semester I have dedicated myself to at least 30 minutes a day spent in the woodshed – reading, gathering information, writing, editing, and being made accountable to my small group for how I use the time and organize my writing projects. This is the discipline of my scholarship. I make time for it daily.

Creativity studies

My research agenda has emerged from my passions, my observations and experiences, my need to become a better teacher and person, and a sense of openness to see what all of this has to teach me. From my early endorsement work at Ashland University, I discovered the fascinating breadth of creativity, specifically how certain overarching ways of being that are exemplified in creative individuals have the capacity to enhance our lives and our work. The desire to study creativity was born.

The inclusion of Creative Thinking Ability as an area of giftedness in Ohio and the confusion of how students identified as such are served has led me to learn more about creativity with an eye toward improving gifted education here at home. I also strongly believe that teachers who are creative risk-takers and see themselves as creative individual are more sensitive to seeing creativity in the micromoments of the teaching day and in seamlessly integrating true creative thinking the way creative individuals do it. My belief in the power of creativity training for teachers drives a great deal of my scholarly writing and presentation work.

Transpersonal psychology

Also as part of my early graduate work at Ashland University, I began reading works in transpersonal (or depth) psychology, which embraces transcendent experiences like those experienced when in the midst of creative work (such as a sense of flow, intuition, imagination, openness to experience, and naiveté). I appreciate transpersonal ways of looking at the world because they assume that interacting with the inner and outer world is continually transformative. It takes research and scholarly work beyond the objective and respects its deep impact on us as humans, as teachers, and as researchers, indeed, on our very identity.

Teacher identity

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My personal experiences in and out of teaching have brought certain topics to the forefront of my research interests. My own personal experience with teacher burnout and crisis, even leaving the profession for a time, led me to look into the transformative aspects of everyday challenges on our teaching identity, and the impact of ongoing reflection and self-knowledge on our efficacy. I find that there are aspects of creativity theory and transpersonal psychology that improve our ability to cope with stress in this profession. I have a history of using creativity in many forms to process events in my life (drawing mandalas, journaling, and songwriting), and these lead me to learn more about how aspects of the creative process enhance our teaching, our interactions with students and colleagues, and our sense of calm in a challenging profession.

Giftedness

My teaching history - interacting with gifted children and adults who truly have a unique way of being - leads me to learn more about this population. My research in the field of intelligence, giftedness, and creative individuals serve my goal of improving the Gifted Intervention Specialist endorsement program here at Ashland University, but it also frames the work I do with teachers, soothes my own feeling of alienation in teaching a misunderstood and under-served population of student, and experiencing the joys and challenges of higher education in the 21st century.

Why do we create? Because it is hopeful.

I view my scholarly and creative work as hope-full – full of hope - which is vital in these challenging days. It is an act of creation: researching and writing an article on the ways creativity work improves teaching and teachers is hopeful; researching and presenting on ways teachers can create a safe haven in their schools for themselves and one another is hopeful; holding conversations about a confusing aspect of the Ohio protocol for creatively gifted students with an eye toward improving it is hopeful; and finding points in narrative research that can lead to transcendence is hopeful. Teaching itself is hopeful, when we are eldering individual human souls into finding their own way, their own purpose, and their own voice.

On the wall of my office hangs my Ashland University Masters of Education in Supervision. I came to AU in 1996 simply to gain my gifted endorsement – four years and a five-figure student loan later I earned a masters and a new sense of purpose. My AU instructors and professors helped me find a teacher, a scholar, a singer/songwriter, and a leader deep inside myself. My Purpose is to continue that legacy.

Note regarding open-access journal publications: No type of payment, monetary or otherwise, has been made by me for any of my publications.

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Reflection on Service

The continued growth of any institution is symbiotically connected with the continued growth of its leaders and members. My record of service to the university, college, department, profession, and community exemplifies my desire to actively serve Ashland University to not only support my own interests and causes, but in a responsive manner to support the organizations in those places of highest need.

My service interests fall within the areas of teacher support, education, especially gifted education, and creativity, as well as responding to the needs of the university, college, and department. I choose based on my ability to connect deeply with the purpose of the organization, my ability to attend and be present, and in response to two questions:

Does this group, its focus, or its members have something to teach me?

Upon entering into these opportunities I often lack confidence or feel out of place. It is in these opportunities where I feel most challenged. In creativity studies, I preach the mantra of risk-taking as a foundation for learning, growth, and innovation. Faculty Senate, Faculty Senate Executive Committee, joining the OAGC Governing Board, and being an AURWC small group coach are all places of challenge to me, and therefore, are all points of the most personal and professional growth. Faculty Senate and Executive Committee both gave me powerful insights into the institution, some which have changed my view of it forever. After a semester volunteering for Executive Committee, I realized that the foundational knowledge, institutional memory, and professional security needed to serve on the committee was not yet in my power. I recognized that I was in no position to serve successfully as a representative of my college and my colleagues until I had gained knowledge and seniority in the institution. It was one of the more challenging and emotional decision to make, to step back from that. I know that eventually I will be able to serve again, and serve better than I can at the present time. I remind myself that it is not a failure, but simply admitting that I took a path I was not ready for.

I am not a supporter of standardized tests for teachers to gain licensure or endorsements. However, when the state of Ohio determined that an Ohio Assessments for Educators (OAE) endorsement exam would soon to be required for my future students, I felt that my presence in creating and vetting assessment questions would better serve teachers than waiting for the exam to emerge and blindly following the protocol. When an invitation came to attend the Pearson/ODE Gifted Test Conference, I immediately opened my calendar for this event. I knew that I could offer a useful perspective to the test creators, but I also knew that any interaction with the testing process would help me to prepare my students for the exam. I was able to lend my voice to the proceedings while gaining insight into testing protocol (not the questions themselves, of course, which would be unethical to share).

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Do I have something to offer that is needed by this group?

Taking on the Life Calling Seminar work, joining the Life Calling and the Faculty Welfare Committees, and offering my expertise to the OAE test review and Piloting event all gave me the opportunity to deeply support colleagues in the institution, as well as teachers and graduate students. In return, I gained valuable knowledge, connections with colleagues, and insight into the institution (the University as well as the institution of K-12 education). I also learned that while I chose these service positions with my own interests and expertise in mind, I continued to experience insecurities and angst. These, too, were places of growth and challenge because they were all innovating into the unknown.

Upon reflection, I feel that my service commitments have grown my sense of professional presence. I am sure that my service work will continue to be uncertain, difficult, and often emotional and frustrating. I enter into my sixth semester of service with the knowledge that I do not need to let these challenges cause me to become discouraged or discontented, because I also know that my service work will continue to bring innovation, new connections, fresh starts, and joy. This knowledge gives me a strong foundation to move forward with strength of commitment, openness of heart, and presence of mind.