

Painting Yourself Into the Professional Growth Picture—Artistic Modification

Joseph S. Renzulli

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.
—Gandhi

Almost everyone views “professional growth” as teachers and other professionals going someplace to get something—new teaching skills, assessment and capacity building strategies, advanced training in a content area, or skills related to classroom or school-wide management. But suppose, for a moment, we also viewed professional growth as bringing something we already have to our work with young people and converting our assets into challenging teaching experiences. In enrichment programs we focus on developing the gifts and talents in young people, but if we are to follow Gandhi’s wisdom, we must also experience the creative change we wish to see in our students.

Most teachers have had, at one time or another, the experience of teaching a lesson that was so successful and satisfying that at its conclusion they might have signed it (figuratively speaking) in much the same way that an artist signs a painting. This kind of personal involvement and excitement is more likely to occur when teachers “inject” into the curriculum material, experiences in which they have a special personal interest and involvement. When material prepared by others is routinely used, some of the excitement and effervescence of good teaching is likely to be lost. Teachers can take steps to recapture the potential for excitement inherent in almost any curricular topic by applying a concept I call artistic modification. This concept can best be described as an invitation to teachers to infuse something of their own choosing and of personal relevance into curricular material that has been prepared by others.

Rationale and Description

A major part of the rationale underlying the concept of artistic modification is derived from the work of Phil Phenix (1987). He points out that instructional material can be either alive or dead, depending on the way it is used or misused in the teaching-learning process. According to Phenix, material is most appropriately used when it serves as an instrument for dialogue and active engagement. When material is imported from sources other than the teacher’s own experience, it may assume an alien quality when not mediated by the teacher. Phenix points out that prepared curricular material is misused when taken literally and uncritically, and when it is considered in only a theoretical and abstract context without constant concern for concrete application and practical outcomes.

Texts and other prepared curricular materials may not encourage the type of engagement and dialogue discussed above because they are often viewed as objective and authoritative presentations of information and reality. Such a view often discourages teachers from tampering” with textbook content, and thus minimizes opportunities for the kinds of dialogue that will make material personally meaningful for students. Phenix believes that if we are to make significant changes in student attitudes and conduct, we must reexamine the ways in which curricular material is mediated by teachers. Proper mediation means that teachers must be encouraged to personalize, interpret, criticize, and dissect curricular material in ways that bring life and meaning to content. The problem, of course, is how do we go about doing this type of mediation, especially in those cases where teachers’ guides are overly prescriptive, curriculum developers do not view mediation as a legitimate part of teachers’ roles, and teachers are simply lack training and practice in bringing their own modifications to the curricular material they are using. The concept is also difficult to convey to teachers because the overuse of prescribed material prepared by others frequently results in an attitude that curricular content can come only from the “content experts. “Such an attitude may cause some teachers to perceive themselves as not having the content background necessary to add material of their own to already prepared curriculum.

Artistic modification does not require an extremely high level of content expertise because it is essentially a personalization process. Each teacher is the best expert of his or her own experience, and artistic modification is simply a process of inviting teachers to put this personalized experience into the material they are using.

Teachers can make their own creative contributions to previously developed materials by using one or a combination of the eight categories of artistic modification described below. If our goal in gifted programs is to promote creative, independent, and advanced level thinking, then using these strategies may involve criticizing and interpreting curricular content, examining content in relation to the teacher’s own values and experiences, and adding content of the teacher’s own choosing, even if additional material is in conflict with the prescribed content of a particular unit of study.

Artistic Modification Strategies

1. Sharing with students a personal experience that is directly or indirectly related to the content. (Showing your slides of the rebuilt Globe Theater, Stratford-on-Avon, Anne Hathaway’s cottage, and other sites related to Elizabethan times in connection with a unit on Shakespeare.)
2. Sharing personal knowledge or insides’ information about a person, place, event, or topic. (Pointing out a Time or Newsweek magazine article on the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Margaret Mead’s research in connection with a unit on anthropology: or biases that might have been reflected in news reporting about events in science or history.)
3. Sharing personal interests, hobbies, independent research, or significant involvements in personal activities. (Showing students your own family tree, immigration documents, and sharing interesting family stories and archives in connection with a unit on genealogy.)

4. Sharing personal values, beliefs, and reflective experiences. (Describe events related to your participation in a civil rights demonstration, women's equity activities, or positions you took related to events or critical issues in connection with a unit on American history.)
5. Sharing personal collections, family documents, or memorabilia. (Bringing to class your collection of newspapers and magazines that describe the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy in connection with a unit dealing with the Civil War and the death of Abraham Lincoln.)
6. Interpreting and sharing your own enthusiasm about a book, film, television program, or artistic performance that is related to a topic you are covering. (Telling a "spy story" from a book such as *The Man Called Intrepid* in connection with the study of World War II.)
7. Pointing out controversies, biases, or restrictions that might be placed on books, newspapers, or other sources of information. (Magazines that depend heavily on advertising by tobacco and liquor corporations might tend to avoid publishing articles on the dangers of smoking and alcohol.)
8. Other. (Suggest your own ways to personalize the material that you could include in a particular unit or lesson.)

From a practical standpoint, these categories and examples are designed to help teachers analyze and understand the different ways in which artistic modifications can be made. As can be seen from these examples, suggestions for modifications can be both general and specific, but they must always be personal rather than prescribed by textbooks or curriculum guides. The goal of this process is to encourage teachers to put themselves into the curriculum rather than drawing totally on the knowledge and experience of the person(s) who developed the material. A related goal is to create excitement and involvement in teachers so that they can, in turn, arouse interest, curiosity and motivation in their students.

Designing Artistic Modifications

Artistic modifications can be based on direct, indirect (or vicarious), and creative experiences. Each type can be further subdivided into categories that represent logical components of the three general types of experiences.

Teachers can also begin practicing how to generate topics for artistic modification by working with others in a small group brainstorming situation. Group interaction often prompts a related idea that may evolve into a good teaching idea/activity. But in order for a subsequent idea or activity to qualify as a personal artistic modification, it must be something that is relevant to the teacher and a product of his or her own experience. It is also a good idea for teachers to pursue this activity individually as a new unit of study or topic is being developed. Artistic modification should always be approached experimentally—that is, various approaches should be tried with groups of students, and modified accordingly, depending on students' reactions. Most artistic modifications involve the ancient and honorable art of storytelling.

Reflecting upon material before it is taught, even if it has been taught many times before, is as important to the teaching process as warm-up activities are for creating physical readiness

and a positive mental attitude for the athlete. The interaction of prepared curricular material with the personal involvement of teachers will result in a “spontaneous combustion” that helps to bring the material to life. In some cases, teachers may already be geared up to inject their own personal involvement into prepared material, but in others, some background reading or other types of preparation may be necessary. Supplementary books on a particular topic can assist in the process by providing material for the teacher that contains unusual insights, controversies, little known facts, or insiders’ information that is not likely to be included in the regular material prepared for students.

The teachers we remember the most are those who “made the material interesting. “Artistic modification is one approach to capitalizing on our own experiences and using them for creative professional growth. Try painting yourself into the curriculum—you’ll like it!

Reference

Phenix, P. H. (1987). *Views on the use, misuse, and abuse of instructional materials* [Paper presentation]. Leadership Training Institute on the Gifted and Talented Annual Meeting, Houston, TX.

JOSEPH S. RENZULLI, Ed.D. is the director of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at the University of Connecticut.