“All Children” Includes The Talented

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The state of Ohio has funded Ohio Summer Honor Institutes since the late 1980s. Each year 16 or 17 private and public institutions of higher education in the state are awarded grants ranging from $40,000 to $105,000 to conduct summer programs for rising sophomores and juniors who have been identified as gifted and talented. Ohio has both a law and a rule mandating the identification of such students, K-12, in the areas of (1) Superior Cognitive Ability; (2) Specific Academic Ability; (3) Creative Thinking Ability; (4) Visual and Performing Arts Ability.
Since 1989, a comprehensive private university in northeast Ohio has been awarded 19 such grants totaling almost a million dollars over the years, to conduct such institutes. Each year about 130 students (65 per week) come to this university to take intensive classes in such areas as philosophy, chemistry, toxicology, mathematics, law, theater, music, creative problem solving, creative writing, business, sports communication, film criticism, field biology, physics, and the like. These courses are taught by university faculty in the liberal arts who possess the Ph.D. in their chosen fields, or, in the case of the Songwriting class, by a singer songwriter who has many albums. Class size is ten or fewer, and the students receive out-of-level content that is typical for college freshmen and sophomores rather than high school freshmen or sophomores, which they are. Average age of the students is 15.

I, the Director of the Institute, am a scholar in the area of the psychology of the gifted and talented, and have published both quantitative and qualitative studies of the students. Informed consent to conduct research is obtained from parents, students, faculty, and staff. Among the instruments administered to the students has been the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Piirto, 1998; Piirto & Johnson, 2004); High School Personality Questionnaire (Piirto & Fraas, 1995; Piirto & Johnson, 2004); Rokeach Value Survey (Piirto, 2005; 2008); the Overexcitability Questionnaire (Piirto & Montgomery, in review). Other studies using the NEO-PI-R, the MPS, the Baron-EQ, the BEM Sex Role Inventory, the Barron-Welsh Art Scale are in process (it takes several years to accumulate the number of responses needed for a quantitative study). Among the goals for these studies has been to confirm the presence of the personality attributes listed on the base of my Piirto Pyramid of Talent Development as a framework. The present study will focus on the summer of 2007.

The day the students arrived, an assessment session was held, where several instruments were administered:

**Assessment**

The quiet settles on them.
Assessment session.
Good test takers—confident—
Obedient to the directions
Skilled in this process of assess-
Meant to find out something—
What? About their personalities
Type preferences—Introversion/Extraversion
Intuition/Sensing
Thinking/Feeling
Perceiving/Judging.
I know what the result will be already
But I interpret their personal results to them
Like the good old guidance counselor I was.
75% or more of them will prefer intuition
but their teachers prefer Sensing.
They work by gut feelings.
Their teachers want the facts, man.
They want them to show their work.
They want neat margins and easy answers.

More of the girls will prefer Thinking
than other/normal girls.
They are tough-minded.
More of the boys will prefer Feeling
than other/normal boys
They are more tender-minded.
Androgynous.

Besides doing psychological research, I am a literary artist, a published poet, novelist, and short story writer. I have sought to create in my teaching and administrating, what Hillman (1975) called, a “poetic basis of mind,” (p. 34) the imaginative capacity of our being (cf. Reynolds & Piirto, 2005; 2007), and I encourage my graduate students, who are attending the Institute to fulfill internship/student teaching requirements for gifted endorsement or for their Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction with Emphasis in Talent Development Education, who have undergraduate majors in English, music, theater, performance, visual arts, and such, to produce master’s capstone projects in arts-based forms. While most choose to do a capstone project in a traditional qualitative or quantitative research format, students with undergraduate majors in the arts and humanities have completed high stakes projects in these areas (Abell, 2001; Bandy, 2001; Bohland, 2001; Daniel, 2001; Frahm, 2006; Hohman, 2001; Hogue, 2007; James, 2002; Keaton, 2001; Stieg, 2007; Webb, 2007).

In addition, the Institute has hired staff who are not only teachers but artists. For example, the assistant director since 1997 is a singer-songwriter, with 3 CDs of her own music, and 2 CDs of her jazz singing with a big band. Each day we began the institute at the morning meeting, by singing a song she wrote when she was a graduate student attending the institute as an assistant to a professor. This song speaks of the joy that ensues when students and faculty are engaged in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect, and describes a rainy night when guitars played by the theater and creative studies faculty rang on the porch of one of the dormitories, enticing the students to throw off their sandals and dance:

**Join The Dance**

Swirling and twirling, our music our dancing
Left timeless effects on the soul
We all came together from our other places
And we made magic that night on the porch
Barefoot dancers and rhythm and clashing
Joined by the love of the four
Attracted like fireflies to the magic of music
We joyously celebrate life on the porch!
Chorus:
Come and join in the dance—be a part of the joy
Come and join in the dance—grab a girl, grab a boy
Come and join in the dance—for the now for the past
Who knows how long it will last?

When it’s perfect you know it
Though we’re not often blessed by a
Moment as perfect as this.
But all of us felt it—the passion, the music
It left us with memories of the dance on the porch
We don’t know that we’re looking for others around us
To join in our barefoot dance
When they find their way to us
We embrace and we laugh and we
Join the swirling to that perfect chance.

We sent out or message to the spirits around us
The muse found her way to my soul
She twirled me and swirled me
She moved me and stirred me
And I know I’ll not be the same anymore.

Join the Dance - video with Jennifer Allen

When the call for papers came for the 1st International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, I thought of doing a theoretical paper somewhat similar to other papers I have written (Piirto, 1999; 2002a; b; in press) which talked about the quality of poetry in qualitative research, and the need to respect the genres of literary prose and poetry when doing such work. Fictional work written for a didactic purpose often suffers from rigidity and a need to fit into the theory (a good example is B.F. Skinner’s 1948 attempt at a utopian novel based on psychological behaviorism, Walden Two; or Ayn Rand’s 1957 Atlas Shrugged and her 1943 The Fountainhead, which propounded her Objectivist philosophy). Similarly, social studies research embodying poetic work suffers from what could be called message sentimentality, the subsuming of artful craft to the need to preach a sermon, as well as from sometimes doggerel-like rigidity in forced rhymes and worn out images. I presented these poems with photographs.
The following poem was timed to several photographs of a web that the professor used in post-assessment, and to a photograph of the students, nine girls and one boy, and two graduate interns, lying on the grass in a circle, with their heads together, meditating, in the class called “The Art and Science of Psychology.”

The Art and Science of Psychology
Eyes Closed

All week we’ve meditated
So we took our group picture
With our eyes closed
But we’ve learned so much
They don’t teach psychology at our high schools
We are 9 girls
Only 1 boy
But I held my own, didn’t I?
Yes, James you did.
Here’s our summary web
All this in one week!
Freud, Jung, Dabrowski, Kohlberg. Erikson
Intuition, Sensing, Feeling, Thinking
Judging, Introversion, Extraversion, Perceiving

We built a labyrinth
We all cried, even the adults
Sketching, Clay, Fingerpaint
Archetypes, dreams, consciousness
Mandalas, Dance, Poems, Journals
Images, body language, systems
Parents, Children.
Psychology. All about us.

One of the most popular courses was in physics, where the professor, who had been teaching in the Institute for about 12 years, alternated years, teaching string theory one year, quarks and leptons another year, and black holes a third year. The students who chose physics were often mainly boys, though 2007’s class had a couple of girls. For the Sharing Show at the end of the week, they visited the local Goodwill, and dramatized the Big Bang. They seem to love the permission to be silly in this atmosphere, studying about black holes among people who are as interested as they are in these extraworldly phenomena:
We thought we’d climb a tree Because Newton is our god

Physics:
String Theory

We thought we’d climb a tree
Because Newton is our god
And you know the story of the apple
And gravity.

String Theory and eleven dimensions.
the three of space and one of time of which we are aware.
What was the universe like
In the seconds after the Big Bang?
Try to comprehend the 4th dimension.

We blew up coke and mentos
In the parking lot.
Our Big Bang.

Teenage Physicists At Goodwill

Andy had to have a royal blue sequined pullover
Wendy found a pink, taffeta semi-formal dress
Sean donned a green sport coat
symbolic of his affinity for all things Irish.
Audie wanted toy weapons
Andy needed rubber gloves
But Steve stole the show
with his maroon dress slacks
and a matching jacket of three-inch fake fur
“You must obey the laws of physics”
“Wow, Captain Physics, You Always Save The Day!”
“Remember, kids, Never go faster than the speed of light”

In fact, one of the reasons the students have viewed the Institute as such a positive experience, according to their exit evaluations, is because they have met people who are like them, who don’t think they are nerds, dweebs, brains, or weirdos, because they are smart. The following poem was from student comments on the evaluations, interspersed with close-up portraits of the variety of faces they show.

Poem About Friends

Contrary to popular perception
These kids are not isolates, loners, nor antisocial

"I love making new friends”
"The best part of being at the camp is
meeting new people that are like me."
"I have some new friends."
"Everyone is nice here. I made several new friends."
"What I love about being here, other smart and crazy people."
"The best thing about being here-- I like the new friends."

Somewhat surprisingly, the most popular course for the years 2006 and 2007 was a course taught by a professor of classics on ancient warfare. The course filled up a month early, and
had a waiting list. Mostly boys, these students demonstrated an astonishing knowledge of such ancient historians as Herodotus and Thucydides.

**Classics: Ancient Weaponry**

They called him Xenophon
He told fascinating stories of ancient wars with visual aids for emphasis.
After one of the students fell asleep he provided breaks.

They asked him questions about obscure battles He could always answer with multiple examples and comparisons to other historic episodes. They were not only willing, but eager to attend a predominantly lecture class for nearly five hours a day.

They were 8 boys and 2 girls
They took Greek names: Diomedes, Mardonius, Themistocles, Alcibiades, Xerxes, Lysander, Thersites, Miltiades, Artemisia, Leonidas

For the sharing show, Xerxes, having seen the movie *300*, wanted to turn his eponymous part into a caricature of homosexuality The others kept egging him on. In duct-taped notebook paper armor They readily took the roles. 30 city states in 480 BCE during the Battle of Thermopylae of 480 BC, an alliance of Greek city-states fought the invading Persian Empire at the pass of Thermopylae in central Greece. They held the Persians back for 3 days A famous last stand. 300 soldiers against a massive army Leonidas of Sparta versus Xerxes the Great of Persia.

They are argumentative and intellectual, They do not like feeling smarter than some of their teachers.

Some of them are obsessed with this history: Leonidas commented, when discussing Thucydides’s *Melosian Dialogues* (the original argument for might makes right), that it was just like the Machiavellian ideology that says it is better to be feared than to be loved.
the discussions of war naturally led
to applications to modern wars
and the current war in Iraq.

Mardonius, in his essay, said,
“War has always fascinated me.”
He is in Boy Scouts, German club, church choir,
Played a tuba solo for the group.

What they all had in common
was the thinking (versus feeling) preference.
Perhaps it was their common interest in cause and effect
that drew them to this intensive.

One of the pleasures of being a professor of education (rather than of English, my original
career, but which I abandoned after a consideration of the waterfalls of student essays one
would have to swim through for oh too many years), is the opportunity to work with high
school students. Annually, I get my “kid fix,” being the director of this institute for 18 years
(2008 was the 19th opportunity to administer the grant). In order to be heard by the
chattering mob at the beginning of group meetings, I have used a Burmese begging bowl
struck with a wooden mallet, instead of yelling, “All right, be quiet, you guys!” or turning
the light switch on and off. One night, after the master class lecture, during which I had
been called out to wait with a boy whose family had had an emergency, I noticed that the
begging bowl’s mallet had been appropriated, from where I had left it on the first row. The
assistant director was an eager former graduate student, a man who went back to the
dormitories after I discovered the mallet’s absence, and who gathered the students (I wasn’t
there, but this is what I was told) and shouted that they had better find my mallet. The poets
in the songwriting class took this opportunity to write a song about the incident, called “Dr.
Piirto.” It was on YouTube for awhile, but then the composers took it down. It was on the
album the class made in 2006. The song begins quietly, and then ascends into screams and
wails, with increasingly agitated repetitions of these words.

**Dr. Piirto**

Dr. Piirto
We’re so sorry
That you lost
Your precious mallet
What will you do?
Dr. Piirto
Don’t get angry
Just ’cause someone
Took your mallet
We still love you.
You better find it!
You better find it!
You better find it!
What will you do?
You better find it!
One behavior that stands out is that these students are argumentative and interested, engaged and willing to debate with their professors. Each evening they attended a master class, taught by one professor, about an area of his/her passion. The toxicology professor spoke on “Does Everything Cause Cancer?”; The physics professor, on “What Is A Black Hole?”; the mathematics professor, on “What Is A Number?” the philosophy professor, on “The Ethics of Sunbathing.” The art professor gave a critical introduction to his newest one-man show in New York. The singer-songwriters gave a concert of new work. The creative problem solving professor, who has an IQ of 160 and a Ph.D. in music composition, played his recent avant-garde composition to the polite attention of the students, most of whom were in music groups in their high schools, but who had not heard this kind of music. They were mostly interested and engaged, and the hands went up in questioning and response. Here is a poem about those raised hands.

**Hands**

We are the ones  
Who always have our hands up  
We have a lot to say  
We are told to wait  
Wait wait wait wait  
Wait until the others are finished  
Wait. I’ll talk to you later.  
Wait, talk to me after class  
Wait, Come in early to talk to me
I don’t have time now
Someone besides Janie please
Yes, yes, Jimmy, we know you know it
Now let’s hear from some of the others.

All of the students are identified as gifted by the Ohio rule, and many of them have been identified as having IQs above the 97th percentile, or achievement in a specific academic area above the 95th percentile. They are often underserved in their schools, as teachers struggle to bring the lower achievers to the middle. To attend a class that moves as fast as they can take, is an opportunity they may not have had up to now. The mathematics classes are an example. The following poem was taken from dialogue and observation.

Math: All Is Number
Do Infinity

“Do infinity, Dr. Wick.
Do Infinity.”
“Why don’t you use case squared?
Can I guess the signal notation for this?”
She holds up her arms in parentheses

“One over,
This is a half squared, a third squared.”
“You’re right. The exponent is constant.
The way we started it—you could start it at one--.

They want him to keep adding zeroes.
“This would give us 50 digits.”
“Let’s just do infinity.”
“I will do infinity, but you.”
“No! Keep doing more—“

They are interested and engaged
In how the number will change
Out at the 50th decimal place.
Everyone adds a comment.

“There’s a famous conjecture about this function.
Using the imaginary piece and putting the one plus one.”
“Do Zeta 3; I want to see what happens.”
“That means that it’s adding up to something imaginary.”

“Raise that number to the 5th power.
One followed by zeroes.”
They watch the screen and giggle.
Oh boy!

Other students have an interest and have scored high on verbal tests. Each year we have offered a creative writing course: some years it has been on writing fiction: “Writing the First Chapter of Your Novel.” In 2007, the focus was poetry. This is a portrait of one of the girls whose poetry writing was a long-time habit, who arrived at the Institute with a pile of
notebooks.

Poet

Wistful she sits
knees to chin
her mind
as orange
as her laces,
creating images
within stillness.

Her notebook is full.
So is her mind’s eye,
while she codes life
Into poems.

Another class studied improvisational theater. The brochure advertisement mentioned the hilarious show, “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?” and the comedy games the talented actors play on that show. Often the class filled with bouncing boys, lanky and loose and 15, class clowns who run around the campus dropping from trees and popping from seat cushions in the fireplace lounge. The professor was an Actors Equity member of the Cincinnati Shakespeare company, and he communicated his love of Shakespeare and uses the nimble minds as well as the bodies of the students in teaching them some memorable dialogues, monologues and scenes.

Theater Improvisation

We want to be like “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?”
We have Shakespeare in the morning
Play improv games in the afternoon
Our parents never thought we could
Memorize all those Shakespeare poems!

When you look for poetry you find it, and once permission was tacitly given, many grabbed the opportunity. A poetic way of knowing is often fun and funny. The poet Kay Ryan (2006) commented on how funny poets are, and how they often see the humorous, to a greater degree than do prose writers. She spoke of the “giddiness indistinguishable from the impulse to laugh” (p. 148). She compared this giddiness to the dance of a manhole cover lifted by a flood of water, “tipping and bobbing like a flower, producing an occasional bell-like chime as it touched against the metal ring.” When students perceive they have permission to be fun and funny, surprises ensue. During the Sharing Show on the last night, about ten boys from different parts of the state jumped up and chanted a rap that many of the rest of us had never heard of. The underground drums of teenagedom had been rumbling and more and more boys jumped up and swayed in joyful recitation.
Obscure Rap

All of a sudden
Aaron turns on YouTube
All these boys jump up
Begin dancing
Chanting this
Obscure rap
They all know
it by heart!
Poetry. Once you permit it
It’s all over the place.

Another class was called Songwriting from the Edge. The edge is the edge of fear, of risk-taking, of performance. Students who had a musical background and an interest in creating the poetry of songs signed up. In 2007, a very talented guitarist sent in an audition tape and showed up. Improvisation is an important aspect of the creative process,[iv] and this class began with students improvising in both words and music.

Songwriting

He practices everyday
for 4 hours after school
Jimi Hendrix is his idol  
“He’s the best guitarist I’ve seen  
For this age” says his teacher.  
We all agree.

They have to send in an audition tape  
of poems or songs to show they’re serious.  
Their home teachers  
don’t encourage improvisation,  
so this is hard, even though  
she’s been taking piano for 10 years,  
he’s been playing drums since 5th grade.  
Clumsy, they try on the roles  
of composers/singer songwriters/rock stars.  
While their tender teacher whispers  
“Walk around the stage, now.”

Discussion

Technically, the poems above have utilized several methodologies. Some were done intuitively, written spontaneously, in the manner of poetry writing everywhere. Their form is free verse, with syllabic repetition, parallelism, and other conventions incorporated within the lines. Some were taken, as is the custom in poetic representation in social science, from more formal written transcripts of ethnographic observations. Each poem, though, shows the opinion of the poet, displayed artfully, one hopes, through the text, but not didactically, in a manner that is not preachy or seeking to teach or edify, but that is descriptive and evocative. In an entry in an encyclopedia (in press), I wrote the following:

Using poetic representation in qualitative research usually takes the form of free verse. Free verse is also called *vers libre*. Often, qualitative researchers who use the technique of vers libre break up interview transcripts into small, or short units, or lines, without regard to foot, syllable, or meter. The purpose is to focus and to intensify the expression of what the participant said. The poetic technique is usually enjambment, which breaks up the text by clauses or phrases, proceeding through the verse to the period at the end. The use of other verse forms such as blank verse (where there is meter but the ends don’t rhyme), the sonnet, the ballad, the villanelle, the rhondo, the epic, the haiku, etc. is rare.

Prendergast (2007) listed the ways that poetry is used in social science research. Among her observations were the facts that poetic inquiry is often

22. Practiced on the margins of qualitative research by a small number of poet/scholars, a number of whom are also literary poets.  
23. Very challenging to evaluate, assess and/or review as little established criteria exist.
Whether the above essay, with poems, fit her observations, is a matter of peer review. This poetic representation has attempted to be both literary and presentational and to show the experience in a way that is not possible through psychological testing and assessment.

[i] This was first a presentation for the 1st International Poetic Inquiry Conference at the University of British Columbia, November 5, 2007.
[iii] Song by Jennifer Allen. Lyrics used with permission.

References


University, Ohio.


**About the Author**

Jane Piirto is Trustees’ Distinguished Professor at Ashland University, Ohio. She has published 6 chapbooks and 1 book of poetry, *Saunas*, with Mayapple Press. She has received two individual artist fellowships from the Ohio Arts Council, one in poetry and one in fiction, and is the Mensa Education and Research Foundation’s 4th Lifetime Achievement Award winner. Her nonfiction books have to do with giftedness and with creativity.