

## Creative, Passionate Teaching, Researching, and Leadership: An Interview with Del Siegle

*Suzanna E. Henson*

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of *Advanced Academics* and authors a technology column for *Gifted Child Today*. Del's research interests include web-based instruction, motivation of gifted students, and teacher bias in the identification of students for gifted programs.

*Henson: What led you to the field of gifted education?*

**Siegle:** I did not have any courses in gifted education as part of my undergraduate degree in Montana. There was one chapter on gifted in our special-education course textbook. The book was authored by Kirk and Gallagher. It wasn't until I became involved in gifted education that I realized that the Gallagher was James Gallagher, who is one of the legends in our field. In my senior year, our state gifted association supplied someone to talk with us about gifted children as part of our orientation for student teaching. I became intrigued by what she had to say. As an elementary-education major I had taken 21 credits of mathematics, which certified me to teach mathematics through grade 9. When I graduated from college, there was an unusual teaching position that involved developing and teaching in an elementary gifted program in the morning and teaching freshman math courses in the afternoon. There was a shortage of mathematics teachers and I was certified to teach ninth-grade mathematics, so the district hired me for the job. I spent the summer after I graduated learning everything I could about gifted education in preparation for the gifted half of the job. Although I had to travel around the country, I did manage to earn 15 credits in gifted education that summer. I fell in love with gifted education, and I was hooked for life once I started working with the students in the fall. Almost 30

years later, I still remain in contact with a number of these first students. Some of them now have children who are in gifted programs.

*Henson: Did the experiences as a gifted and talented coordinator in Montana help you transition to a PhD program, and later to your work as a professor?*

**Siegle:** I entered the PhD somewhat by chance. I loved working in gifted education and wanted to learn everything I could about it. Each summer, I searched for classes to improve what I was doing. In some ways I have always felt like an imposter, so I continued to want to learn more. In the process, I collected quite a few credits. One day a professor at an area college told me that I had earned enough credits for a master's degree if I completed a couple of required courses and a project. It seemed like a good idea, so I took the courses, completed a project, and received the master's. The courses were in statistics and educational research, which were a lot of fun. My success in those courses gave me confidence to earn a PhD. I wrote a handbook on gifted education for the state gifted association for my final master's project. My friend Jann Leppien, who was also a Montana teacher, had earned her master's degree in the Three Summers Program at the University of Connecticut. She shared the handbook with Sally Reis and Joe Renzulli while they were speaking at our state conference. Reis and Renzulli had just been awarded The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented and were looking for graduate students. They offered Jann and me graduate assistantships. Jann, Stuart Omdal, and I started the doctoral program the next year. The PhD seemed like the next logical step in learning more about gifted education.

I loved working with gifted students, so I wasn't sure that I made the right decision during the first couple of years in the doctoral program. I missed the classroom a lot. As a teacher working directly with gifted students, I saw on a daily basis what a difference gifted education made in their young lives. The PhD program at UConn is designed to produce researchers. While I enjoyed developing my research skills, I did miss the daily contact with young people.

As a professor, I've discovered that I am once again involved with gifted kids; they just happen to be a little older. In some cases, they are a lot older. We currently have a 71-year-old doctoral student at the University of Connecticut.

*Henshon: What are the most important lessons you have learned?*

**Siegle:** First, working with gifted young people can be one of the most rewarding experiences an educator and parent can know. We are very fortunate to be involved in a field that involves working with a resource that has unlimited potential. I think we sometimes forget how much young people are capable of accomplishing. Second, there isn't an all-purpose gifted child. Just as children differ physically from each other, their gifts also differ. We will never find a single, perfect way to identify gifted children because there isn't a single type of gifted child. Joe Renzulli (2005) proposed two types of giftedness: creative producers and schoolhouse gifted. Callahan and Miller (2005) presented similar categories in their chapter in Sternberg and Davidson's book on conceptions of giftedness. The two may overlap, but not always. Both have valuable gifts that need to be nourished. Third, just as there isn't a single type of gifted child, there isn't a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum. Services for gifted children should be customized to meet the talent area, learning style, and interest of the child. This is problematic in a school environment that keeps everyone on the same page at the same time. Fourth, gifted students don't always love learning everything. They have strengths and weaknesses and their interests and talents vary greatly. Gifted education needs to be about servicing the strengths that bring children to our attention in the first place. We should be providing opportunities for talent to surface, identifying that talent, and developing that talent. We should be discovering students' strengths and then enhancing and developing those strengths to higher levels. Rather than trying to predict giftedness, I think our field needs to spend more time providing students with opportunities and developing the talents that arise out of those opportunities. As a field we get in trouble when we try to predict future giftedness. I agree with Nancy Robinson (2005) that we need better methods of assessing existing talent. Finally, gifts do not develop without encouragement and expertise. This includes providing emotional support for gifted kids. I believe gifted students should be taught about their giftedness. I favor François Gagné (2005) and Joe Renzulli's (2005) conceptions of giftedness. Gagné differentiated between gifted and talented. He talked about individuals taking their gifts and turning them into talents. Renzulli noted that part of giftedness is applying task commitment and creativity to above average ability. Both of these scholars talk about developing talents. Children need to know that they play an important role in developing their talents. We also need to find better ways to harness the expertise necessary to move students' talents to the next level.

*Henshon: What led you to creativity?*

**Siegle:** My father was very creative so I grew up in a creative environment. Limited resources forced my parents to find creative solutions to problems. Hav-

ing that modeled was very important. Creativity really is the essence of life. It is the impetus that moves humanity forward. In addition to being useful, it makes life more interesting and fun.

*Henshon: Do you see a connection between the creative process and the research process?*

**Siegle:** Of course. Looking at problems in different ways and developing and testing creative solutions to those problems is what research is all about. There is a lot of boring research being conducted and published. Part of the reason is the pressure on young professors to publish or perish. I think researchers should step back and really think about the important questions that we need to answer in our field and then go about creatively addressing them through research. One of my initiatives as NAGC President is to expand the role of the university network. I hope to hold a retreat next year where we can discuss the pressing research issues our field should be addressing.

One of the problems with much research is that researchers tend to become too vested in their own theories and strategies and spend too much time trying to prove them, as opposed to creatively seeking alternatives that expand their understanding. Once we believe we have the answer, all creativity stops. Creative researchers continue to ask new questions and search for alternative explanations and procedures.

*Henshon: You teach a class in creativity at the University of Connecticut. Can you tell us how you went about developing the class?*

**Siegle:** Karen Westberg taught the creativity class at UConn before I did, so I started with her syllabus. I also borrowed some ideas from Jonathan Plucker and Susan Baum, friends who taught creativity courses at other universities. The gifted students I taught, as well as what I know about adult learners, have influenced the way I organize the course. I have three goals for the class. First, I try to develop the creativity of the students in the class. Since most of the students in my creativity class are pre-service teachers, I also want to help them learn to teach more creatively. We spend class time discussing how they can implement various creativity strategies into the content they teach. Finally, I want them to appreciate and develop the creativity of the students they will be teaching. We accomplish this through numerous weekly projects and hands-on activities. It is a popular class and usually fills the first day that course registration begins.

*Henshon: Besides teaching standard doctoral programs, you also teach a freshman honors seminar in Nurturing Personal Creativity Through Digital Photography. Can you tell us something about your experiences teaching this class?*

**Siegle:** In many ways, this class has rejuvenated my teaching and my love of gifted education. A few years ago I was fortunate to be named a Teaching Fellow at UConn. This is an honor awarded to professors who have been recognized for outstanding teach-

ing. A maximum of two or three people are selected each year. The honors program asked many of us to teach freshman honors seminars. The goal is to create seminar experiences for freshman honors students where they can connect with a professor on a personal level and bond with the university. I had always taught graduate students, so working with undergraduate students was a new experience. I learned quickly that these talented, young students are older versions of the fourth- to eighth-grade gifted students I taught. They are the university's brightest and most creative students. These talented freshmen remind me each week how important it is to recognize and develop young talent. Each week I select a theme for the students to photograph. They create some interesting images based on the weekly themes. I try to create assignments that require a bit of thought and creativity. One of the first assignments is to photograph something that is both "near and far" at the same time. Another week, they illustrate the concept of "people without people." One week they take a photograph of either their hands or feet that illustrates the essence of who they are as a person. It is exciting to witness the different ways they approach these projects. It is always fun to be surprised by an image that I would not have thought to create. From a photography standpoint, the purpose of the class is to open students' eyes to the world around them by helping them see and appreciate the lines, patterns, shapes, and textures that surround them. Additionally, we search for unique perspectives of common objects and events.

*Henshon: What other areas have held your interest over the years and how have they evolved?*

**Siegle:** Naturally, photography is an interest outside the field of gifted education. For as long as I can remember I have been interested in photography. My father spent some time in Germany as a translator for the Army hockey team. He purchased a bellows camera there and took a lot of pictures, so I grew up watching him take photographs, which naturally attracted me to photography. I began working as a photographer after high school and worked as a photographer for 8 years before I went to college. I probably would still be a photographer if I had not started to go blind.

While working as a photographer for a small community newspaper, I became interested in education. When my eyesight started to fail, I went to college to become a teacher. In the interim, I underwent my first corneal transplant. Although the transplant was successful and I could have returned to a career in photography, I was hooked on teaching. I still enjoy photography as a pastime.

I also enjoy gardening. Gardens are continually changing and producing daily surprises. Each day there is something new and surprising occurring in a garden. Gardening is also a very creative act. It involves taking some basic elements of the planet and manipulating them to create different, and often more interesting environments.

*Henshon: Your column about technology in GCT has been well received. How did your interest in technology and the Internet as a learning tool evolve?*

**Siegle:** I try to feature practical uses of technology in the column. I also try to discuss using software that teachers already have on their computers, or software that is free or very inexpensive. As a teacher, I was frustrated by presenters who demonstrated exciting activities, only to learn that to do these activities required purchasing expensive equipment or software. Teachers should be able to take the content of my *GCT* columns and immediately try it without having to spend a lot of money.

The Internet is still in its infancy. We have only scratched the surface of how to use it as a learning tool. My first experience with the Internet involved e-mail, ftp sites, and gopher sites. Of those, e-mail has remained somewhat constant, while the latter two morphed into components of the Web. Internet usage in the early days was limited to techies. The Web really opened the Internet to everyone. Now we are seeing evolution within the Web. Aside from being a single repository for all of the knowledge known to humanity, it has become a tool that we use to interact with each other. Educators have only begun to explore how to turn those interactions into learning experiences. One area that is gaining popularity is educational gaming. This is not an area that I research, but some interesting research is occurring in this arena.

*Henshon: What were the most important lessons that you learned (from a mentor)?*

**Siegle:** Working at the University of Connecticut, Joe Renzulli and Sally Reis have had a big impact on my thinking. There are two important lessons I have learned. The first is the importance of authentic learning. Teachers are more effective when they give students an opportunity to work on authentic problems. It doesn't matter whether one is teaching a fourth grader or a graduate student. Creating authentic products or services for an authentic audience makes learning meaningful. The second lesson is the importance of giving students choices. All of us perform better when we work on something that interests us. We can increase student interest by giving them options.

*Henshon: If you had to name other individuals within the field and possibly beyond who have had the greatest effect on your thinking, who would they be?*

**Siegle:** During the past 4 years I have had an opportunity to work with Joyce VanTassel-Baska within NAGC's leadership structure. I have learned a great deal from her about how to be an effective leader. Joyce has an uncanny ability to elicit and synthesize ideas through group interactions.

*Henshon: What do you see as the most important questions that studies should address?*

**Siegle:** I am not sure that we have a lot of data to support how similar and different gifted students are from

other students. I think we make a number of assumptions about characteristics of gifted students that are not very well researched. We need to know more about how to identify and develop talent, including better assessment tools to recognize talent as it is emerging.

*Henshon: What are some areas within the field that you think may have been misinterpreted as far as the research goes?*

Siegle: I think we may have overextended Dabrowski's work. I also believe some of the characteristics associated with spatial learners need additional research. A former doctoral student of mine, Becky Mann, and I worked on developing an instrument to identify spatial learners. We experienced limited success. We still need to learn more about this population. David Lubinski is doing interesting research on the importance of this talent.

*Henshon: What kinds of writing and research are you currently doing?*

Siegle: I have been working on motivation and the underachievement issue for the past 8 years with my wife, D. Betsy McCoach. We have an achievement model that shows some promise. There appears to be a relationship between and among three key perceptions (task value or meaningfulness, self-efficacy, and environmental perceptions), a resultant behavior (self-regulation), and achievement (Siegle & McCoach, 2002). We have a better understanding of some parts of the model than others. There are two areas within the model that I am working on right now. I am interested in what makes something meaningful. Eccles and Wigfield (1995) have some interesting ideas in that area. This fall we will be working with university honors students to learn how to make learning more meaningful. I am also interested in self-efficacy and the role that ability and effort perceptions play into it. I believe ability and effort perceptions may play out differently for gifted students. This is possibly because of their giftedness, but also possibly because of their awareness of being identified as gifted and how their giftedness was explained to them.

*Henshon: What kinds of work do you see yourself doing in the near future?*

Siegle: I probably will continue working in the area of student motivation. There are so many aspects to explore.

*Henshon: What are some future developments you hope to see in the field?*

Siegle: As incoming president of NAGC, I have a number of initiatives that I hope will move the field of gifted education forward over the next 2 years. These include the following:

1. *Enhance International Participation.* During the past decade, there has been an increased international interest in gifted education. This is evident in the number of foreign students seeking advanced degrees in the United States,

and by the increase in gifted education conferences around the world. While there are international organizations dedicated to gifted education, the United States has a level of expertise and infrastructure to assume an international leadership role. The United States also can learn from the international community. NAGC is introducing an international strand at the 2007 Minnesota conference. We also will be exploring other ways that we can assist the international community and ways the international community can become more involved in the United States.

2. *Expand the Mission of the University Network.* The university network evolved with the development of the joint NAGC and CEC-TAG NCATE standards. While the NCATE work will continue, we hope to expand the mission of the university network by holding an annual retreat at which university faculty can share ideas related to higher-education issues in gifted education. As mentioned earlier, this includes developing a possible research agenda for the next 10 years.

3. *Promote Advocacy.* We also need to take a more active role in training professors, administrators, parents, and teachers to be advocates for gifted education. NAGC will begin this effort by dedicating part of the September Board of Directors' meeting to advocacy training. We also will develop a plan to train NAGC divisions and state affiliate officers. Over the next 2 years, we hope to develop and distribute local, state, and national advocacy material. This may include developing position papers ready for release, collecting, and posting positive news stories about local and state advocacy successes, and preparing people for their state legislative sessions.

4. *Increase Parental Awareness of G/T Issues.* Parents are a stakeholder group that our field has failed to fully reach. We need to recognize the important and powerful role parents play. We also need to develop material that parents will find useful. SENG and NAGC are jointly developing a brochure on gifted children for pediatricians to distribute in their offices. Over the next 2 years, we will examine how we can better serve the parents of gifted children and how we can mobilize those parents to influence public opinion about gifted education at the local, state, and national level.

5. *Move into the Video World.* As more people gain access to high-speed Internet at home and Internet 2 continues to grow, video on the Internet is gaining popularity. Gifted organizations should begin to develop a video library related to gifted education. Some possible items can include short interviews with leaders in the field, model lessons for teachers to view, and parenting tips. We also can explore Webinars that showcase the expertise within our field. These will enhance our ability to "spread the word."

6. *Expand Professional Training Opportunities for Teachers.* Many people are not able to attend a national conference. The NAGC Education Commission's new Regional Academy program will bring programming to sites around the country. The program is being field tested this year. If these academies are successful, we may expand them. Video training also may become part of this initiative.

These are some of the initiatives I hope to implement as NAGC president. This is an exciting time for our field. I think we often have been too reticent. We need to be more vocal about the importance of recognizing and developing talent. I believe as long as the field remains true to that mission, it has a bright future and it can make a difference not only for millions of children, but also for a planet that benefits from their expertise.

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