Biographical case study: Assessing the life of Bill Gates as a creative, gifted and talented person


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Executive Summary

This case study assesses, analyses, and discusses the successful life of the entrepreneur Bill Gates (Founder of Microsoft software) as an intelligent, gifted and talented person. The work of Simonton (2000), Sternberg (2006), Renzulli (1986) Csikszentmihalyi (1999a), on talented and gifted persons, shows that Bill Gates fits into three of the four categories outlined by Riley et al. (2004) Ministry of Education (New Zealand), namely:
1. *Intellectual/Academic* refers to students with exceptional abilities in one or more of the learning areas (i.e., English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology).

2. *Creativity* refers to students with general creative abilities as evidenced in their abilities to problem-find and problem-solve, and their innovative thinking and productivity.

3. *Social/Leadership* refers to students with interpersonal and intra-personal abilities and qualities, which enable them to act in leadership roles.
Introduction

SEATTLE - If you spend time with the Gates family it is most probable that someone will mention the “water incident”. The future software guru was a headstrong 12-year-old and was having a particularly nasty argument with his mother at the dinner table. His father lost his cool and threw a glass of cold water in the boy’s face. The young boy snapped back with something like this: “Hey thanks for the shower!” (Guth, 2009)

Behind the Bill Gates success story is the other William Gates (Sr.), his father. It is the story of his father about the young Gates junior’s early years and the raising of Bill (Jr.) that generates interest by almost everyone. Questions like: ‘How did he grow up?’, ‘What was his life like as a child in the Gates household?’, and ‘What was he like in senior high school?’ In this case study, I will look primarily at “Raising the young Gates” and I will endeavor to identify patterns and traits of giftedness, talent, and creativity which could be linked to the work of Renzulli (1986), Simonton (2000), Sternberg (2006), and Csikszentmihalyi (1999a). In the second section, I will look at some influences, time frames, historical, political, economic and social events that shaped the wealthy and very successful Bill Gates (Jr.) to become one of the richest men and most influential men in the world.

Short biography of Bill Gates (Pettinger, 2010)

William Henry Gates (Jr.) was born on October 28, 1955, in Seattle, Washington. As founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates is one of the most influential and richest people on the planet. Recent estimates of his wealth put it at $56 billion. In recent years he has retired
from working full time at Microsoft, instead, he has concentrated on working with his charitable foundation “The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation”

Bill Gates foundation of Microsoft

Bill Gates founded Microsoft in 1976 when he formed a contract with MITTS (Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems) to develop a basic operating system for their new microcomputers. In the early days, Bill Gates would review every line of code. He was also involved in several aspects of Microsoft’s business such as packing and sending off orders.

The big break for Microsoft came in 1980 when IBM approached them for a new BASIC operating system for its new computers. In the early 1980s, IBM was by far the leading PC manufacturer. However increasingly there developed many IBM PC clones; (PCs developed by other companies compatible with IBM’s). Thus, Microsoft was able to gain the dominant position of software manufacture just as the personal computer market started to boom.

Bill Gates – Windows

In 1990, Microsoft released its first version of Windows. This was a breakthrough in operating software as it replaced text interfaces with graphical interfaces. It soon became a best seller and was able to capture the majority of the operating system market share. In 1995 Windows 95 was released, setting new standards and features for operating systems.
Throughout his time in office Bill Gates has been keen to diversify the business of Microsoft. For example, Microsoft’s Internet Explorer has become the dominant web browser, although in one area, at least, Microsoft has not gained Monopoly power and has been dwarfed by Google. Nevertheless, the success of Microsoft in cornering various aspects of the software market has led to several antitrust cases. In 1998 US v Microsoft, Microsoft came close to being broken up into 3 smaller firms but survived.

**Philanthropic Activities – Bill Gates**

Bill Gates is married to Melinda French (married in 1992). They have 3 children Jennifer (1996), Rory (1999) and Phoebe (2002). With his wife Bill Gates formed the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Bill Gates says much of the inspiration came from the example of David Rockefeller. Like Rockefeller, Gates has sought to focus on global issues ignored by the government; he also expressed an interest in improving the standards of public school education in the US. Recently Gates announced that from 2008 he would work full time on his philanthropic interests. Forbes magazine 2004 estimated that Gates has given over $24 billion dollars in the 4 years from 2000 to 2004.

**The traits of Bill Gates as a creative and talented person; perspectives of the four researchers referred to in the introduction**

**Raising Bill Gates —**
Bill as a diligent learner

Bill Gates at an early age became a diligent learner. He read the World Book Encyclopedia series start to finish. His parents encouraged his appetite for reading by paying for any book he wanted. Sternberg (2006) explains that knowledge can help or hinder creativity. One needs to know enough about a field to move forward. It is this predisposition and his unquenching desire to learn that has propelled him into more creative ways of thinking.

Who is in control? Is Bill in need of a counselor?
The battles reached a climax at dinner one night when Bill Gates was around 12. Over the table, he shouted at his mother, in what today he describes as "utter, total sarcastic, smart-ass kid rudeness". That's when Mr. Gates Sr., in a rare blast of temper, threw the glass of water in his son's face.

He and Mary brought their son to a therapist. "I'm at war with my parents over who is in control," Bill Gates recalls telling the counselor. Reporting back, the counselor told his parents that their son would ultimately win the battle for independence, and their best course of action was to ease up on him (Guth, 2009).

Sternberg (2006) comments about thinking styles and he explain that attributes required for creative thinking include, but are not limited to a willingness to overcome obstacles, willingness to take risks, willingness to tolerate ambiguity and self-efficacy. In particular, buying low and selling high typically means defying the crowd, so that one has to be willing to stand up to conventions if you want to think and act in creative ways. This is particularly true of Bill as a young boy aged between 12 and 14 years of age. It is during these early years that this thinking style was developed and it continued throughout his career.

**Freedom for Bill Gates at Lakeside school:**

Bill Sr. and Mary ultimately took a page from that upbringing: They backed off. They enrolled their son in a school that they thought would give him more freedom. That was the private Lakeside School, now known as the place where Bill Gates discovered computers. Simonton (2000) identifies two factors that explain the acquisition of creative potential:
a) Diversifying experiences help weaken the constraints imposed by conventional socialisation.

It is this newly found freedom, which opened up the world to Bill, he realised that "'Hey, I don't have to prove my position relative to my parents. ‘I just have to figure out what I'm doing relative to the world’, Bill said (Guth, 2009, p 1). This was the start of a global perspective for Bill.

b) Challenging experiences that help strengthen a person’s capacity to persevere in the face of obstacles.

As a young boy, assisted by his mother, he took on the daunting tasks of negotiating with experienced CEO’s managers, and directors. It is these challenges and experiences that shaped Bill and that have developed his perseverance, and sharp business acumen.

Unconventional ways of thinking; Bill dropping out of college to do business

His parents played supporting roles. They acquiesced when Bill quit Harvard and then moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to start Microsoft. It was a tough decision to back (Guth, 2009). Sternberg (2006) points out that to be creative decision-making is required. He continues by explaining that one aspect of switching between conventional thinking and unconventional thinking is the decision that one is willing to think in unconventional ways that one is willing to accept thinking in terms different from those to which one is accustomed and with which one feels comfortable.

Maximise children’s memory for information; what type of information is best?

The fact that Bill dropped out of College is possible due to the fact that that he felt like he was just developing his capacity to store more knowledge. Renzulli (1986)
refers to schoolhouse giftedness which might be called test-taking or lesson-learning giftedness. It is this type of giftedness that has prompted Bill to move on from college to start his business. He has seen the challenge of the business world and the possibilities in computer software as more rewarding.

Renzulli (1986) describes the second type of giftedness, Creative Productive Giftedness. In other words, he says that creative productive giftedness is simply putting one’s abilities to work on problems and areas of study that have personal relevance to one and that can be escalated to appropriately challenging levels of investigative activity. Bill’s focus was directed towards Creative Productive efforts. Sternberg (2006) makes the following statement to support this notion. Teaching for creative as well as analytical and practical thinking is still superior compared to one’s goal to maximize children’s memory for information.

The life of Bill gates; the historical, social, political, and economic factors in context

Leadership and philanthropy

Bill’s Mother, Mrs. Gates was diagnosed with a rare form of breast cancer in the early 1990’s. As she battled the disease, she continued to urge her son to do more philanthropy, as she has done from a very early stage in his life. Ms. Gates passed away in June 1994. About six months later, standing in a line for a movie with his son and daughter-in-law, Melinda, the elder Mr. Gates again broached the idea of
philanthropy. A week later, the software mogul set aside about $100 million to create a foundation that his father could run (Pettinger, 2010).

Renzulli’s (1986) Three-Ring Model of Giftedness suggests a new dimension to his model of giftedness. Gifted education should play a role in preparing persons with high potential for ethical and responsible leadership in all walks of life. He reasons that social capital differs from the economic and intellectual capital in that it focuses on a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and our community at large. Bill (Jr.) was exposed to the role model of his mother and father who served as volunteers in charity organisations like United Way during his childhood. Bill (Jr.) stepped up after his mother passed away, and this increased his social capital up to the point where he is now working full time at the Bill and Malinda foundation with his father Bill (Sr.). This area of the social capital and responsibility needs to be developed in creative and talented people, in my opinion. Social responsibility and ethics should be included in programmes for creative and talented students. Ahuvia et al., as cited in Renzulli (1986), supports this need of social responsibility where the decline in civic and social participation has been evident. The increasing tendencies for young people to focus on materialism, self-indulgence, narrow professional success and individual economic gain are alarming.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Flow, Creativity & the Evolving Self

Csikszentmihalyi (1999a) purported that the middle class doesn't stretch him or herself because they are comfortable. It seems like highly creative and motivated
people come from lower and upper class, he stated. Sometimes if a child’s dad passes away, when at a young age, it acts as an inspiration to him or her. Bill Gates (Jr.) came from an upper middle-class family, and it could have contributed to his creativity. He wanted to make his own fortune.

In the right place at the right time with the right set of skills?

Csikszentmihalyi (1999a, p. 313) suggests a systems approach to study creativity:

“Creativity research in recent years has been increasingly informed by a systems perspective. Starting with the observations of Morris Stein (1953,1963) and the extensive data presented by Dean Simonton (1988,1990, 2000) showing the influence of economic, political and social events on the rates of creative production, it has become increasingly clear that variables external to the individual must be taken into account if one wishes to explain why, when, and where new ideas or products arise from and become established in a culture (Gruber, 1988; Harrington, 1990)”.

Bill Gates and Steve Jobs

The questions to “why”, “when” and “where” Bill Gates was successful in creating software and an operating system (PC) which the whole world could use, compared to Steve Jobs (founder Apple Mac) who was born within the same time frame (both were born in the same year in the USA). The need for ‘personal computers’ at the time, and the social, political, and economic climate were conducive for such a “good break” in the computer industry. Thus, Microsoft was able to gain the
dominant position of software manufacture just as the personal computer market started to boom (Guth, 2009).

Amabile as (cited in Simonton, 2000) concludes that an explicit social psychology emerged to supplement the cognitive, differential, and the developmental perspectives of creativity. It is this social psychology that supports the systems approach of Csikszentmihalyi and the success of Gates (Microsoft) and Jobs (Apple Mac) within the opportunist time frame identified.

**Interpersonal Environment:**

Particular valuable is the inquiries into the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for performing a task. Bill’s (Jr.) score on the SAT test at school (test to determine the readiness of high school students for college) is of particular interest here. He scored 1590, which is of the highest scores ever recorded for this test. He was very proud of this fact, as he boasted about his top performance on this task to others. Indeed an intrinsic motivation and reward, and it gave him a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Sternberg (2006) shows that intrinsic, task-focused motivation is also essential to creativity. He continues by saying that: “...people rarely do truly creative work in an area unless they really love what they are doing and focus on...” (p. 89). The intrinsic rewards of doing well at school and in tests did motivate Bill. On an extrinsic level, one can conclude that when he and his business partner Paul Allen,
netted their first $20,000 US for creating computer software Traf-o-data they were extrinsically rewarded and motivated. The program was designed to analyse the traffic in Seattle. Bill was only 16 years of age at that point. Amabile, Eisenberger and Cameron (as cited in Simonton, 2000, p. 154) support this notion: “Creativity usually appears more favored when individuals perform a task for inherent enjoyment rather than for some external reason that has little to do with the task itself. However, circumstances also occur in which the extrinsic motivation can contribute to the amplification of individual creativity”. Both of these types of interpersonal motivators have played a role in the creative and giftedness of Bill (Jr.).

**DISCIPLINARY ENVIRONMENT:**

In 1990, Microsoft released its first version of Windows. This was a breakthrough in operating software as it replaced text interfaces with graphical interfaces. Csikszentmihalyi’s model of creativity identifies three subsystems and the dynamic interaction between the three (Systems View). The first entails the individual, the second the domain, and thirdly the field. Looking at the third subsystem, the field, he purports that colleagues are essential to the realisation of individual creativity. For example, Bill working together with his co-founder Paul Allen, and working together with hundreds of employees who contributed to ideas (brainstorming, etc.). Creativity does not exist until those making up the field decide to recognize that a given creative product represents an original contribution to the domain (Simonton, 2000). Once psychologists acknowledged that creativity is a systemic rather than an individualistic phenomenon, it becomes far more difficult to study (Simonton, 2000).
In the case of Bill and Microsoft, it is clear that the systems approach highlights the dynamic flow of creativity within the specific domain of developing computer software and the influence of other creative employees in this dynamic process.

**SOCIOCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT:**

It has become increasingly clear that certain political environments affect the degree of creativity manifested by the corresponding population (Simonton, 2000). One example is the fact that Bill has sought to focus on global issues ignored by the US government. Sternberg (2006, p. 89) supports this notion: “It also helps to become a major creative thinker, if one is able to think globally as well as locally, distinguishing the forest from the trees and thereby recognizing which questions are important and which are not”.

**Actualization of creative potential over the life of Bill Gates; relationship between creativity and age:**

The pessimistic view that creativity decreases with age is simply not true. Empirical and theoretical literature shows that such a conclusion is not true (Csikszentmihalyi, Dennis, and Simonton as cited in Simonton, 2000).

“They are actually possible for creators to display a qualitative and quantitative resurgence of creativity in their final years (Lindaur and Simonton as cited in Simonton, 2000, p. 154). A good example is the development and future success of
the Microsoft software company. The other aspect, one could reason, was Bill’s
decision to get involved in philanthropy, which is a culmination of wisdom and
experience and the development of social capital. One could classify this as social
intelligence or social creativity, which developed with success and with age for Bill.

Conclusions and Recommendations

When we teach gifted and talented people they should be aware of burning local
and global issues. Greatness lies in a systems approach, in the right place at the
right time with a burning interest, and a dogged determination.
References and Appendices


ABOUT THE RESEARCHER (AUTHOR):
William van Zyl is a Design and Visual Communication teacher at a secondary school in New Zealand. As a postgraduate student and researcher his academic interests are Open Education (Radical Openness), Alternatives to Neoliberalism, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Collaboration, P2P Teaching and Learning Technologies, and the Philosophy of P2P Processes and P2P Technologies (Theorists: Foucault, Habermas & Popper). He also has keen interests in the Gifted and Talented, Technology Education, and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE’s) like Moodle & Google Classroom. Sustainable Architecture, the implementation of bio-mimetics, and animal architecture are some of his Design and Visual Communication areas of study.