

A QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AS A MORE POSITIVE TEACHING MODEL AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR STUDENTS

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Abstract

Multiple Intelligences are discussed as an alternative to the more restrictive ways of thinking about skills for learning that are commonly held. Students have various mental skills which include visual-spatial intelligence, and others, for a total of eight. This contrasts with the usual thinking that logical-mathematical intelligence and linguistic intelligence are the exclusive way to learn and teach language. The author proposes that this more complete model is more positive and creative for the teacher and more encouraging for students, facilitating an appreciation for diversity, for students' own intelligences and the varieties of intelligences in others.

I see two advantages of a Multiple Intelligences (MI) approach to classroom teaching. MI offers a framework that I can use as a teacher to view my students that is inherently positive. MI also creates a variety of ways they can see themselves and their classmates. At first I will give some background on the need I see for MI as a concept and share my understanding of MI. Then I will say some things about Cooperative Learning (CL), which I think will be the most effective way to introduce MI to classes. I will also give a little of my teaching philosophy, to help the reader become familiar my background. Then I will explain how I see MI working my classes.

Background of the problem

What teacher doesn't know of a diligent student who despite all efforts doesn't seem to be learning a second language? Perhaps even more to the point, we can recall Schmidt's Wes, a case study of a visual artist who plateaued in his learning of a second language, Once he had enough language for basic communication, even though he lived in an English

speaking environment and had extensive contact with native speakers of English, he did not progress beyond fossilized forms of usage and did not develop more nuanced grammar. I think his aversion to ESL classrooms is particularly telling. I think that the idea of multiple intelligences might offer more avenues of learning for more students and wider appreciation for diversity in the classroom. In the first instance we have a student who was facile with his first language and in the second a person who could communicate sufficiently for his needs and disdained regular classes. How can it be that people who learn their first language sometimes have such difficulty with the second?

A Few words about MI

Multiple intelligences allows us to use one that is our strongest inclination. The intelligences that meet the standards are: linguistic, mathematical-logical, visual-spatial, rhythmic-musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist. Traditional classrooms are often skewed toward linguistic and mathematical-logical intelligences.

When we learned our first language did we have an array of cues to pick from? In first language acquisition I suspect we had a rich enough environment to facilitate any of the multiple intelligences.

An example of such a rich environment would be appropriate at this point. I think the plays of William Shakespeare are exemplary of a rich environment appropriate to our amusement and edification. The play's the thing and/or the play is the thing. Watching the plays and responding as one will to a spectacle that offers such variety as: lists of flowers and their magical properties, internal monologues for those of us who are intrapersonally inclined, poetry for linguistics, music, logical consequences, law, costumes, dance and other types of movement, and, as they say, much, much more, is a feast for all of the intelligences. I would suggest the almost universal appeal of these works stems from their appeal to the multiple intelligences, all inclinations.

A few words of clarification about the multiple intelligences are in order. A strong inclination doesn't preclude more than one. With some possible exceptions, most people can develop in more than one area.

I think though the first element we need to pursue is presenting a suitable variety of language learning activation so that we can achieve the three goals presented by Armstrong (Armstrong, 2001): fit, growth and celebration. The activities should offer something that will fit the inclination or inclinations of any particular individual in our class. They should offer opportunities for students to grow in areas outside of their inclination(s) and they should foster an appreciation and celebrate the diversity of intelligences.

Some relevant comments about Cooperative Learning (CL) and of the sources of some of my ideas

CL as defined by Jacobs, et al. (Jacobs, Power, Inn, 2002) posits eight basic principles that define and guide creating and maintaining a positive atmosphere where learning can take place. Although I risk being reductive I might say everyone should be engaged, play fair, work hard and nobody gets hurt. I think this captures the spirit of the endeavor. I think the justification of group work is well addressed so I will turn my attention to the issue of getting started.

I envision a sort of golden double helix of classroom teaching where the elements are woven together in an on-going braid to create an environment of energy and curiosity and mutual respect. The elements are drawn from CL and Nation (Nation, 2001). From Nation the notions of vocabulary as basic gives a firm foundation and his quadrad of equal time for comprehensible input, output, fluency and focus on form is a thoroughly research based approach from which I have borrowed freely.

I would like to lay out a rationale for principled eclecticism that offers a principled variety based on MI. I've considered before ways to characterize learning styles and so it is gratifying to go beyond style and think in terms of intelligences. The basic notion of presenting materials in a variety of ways has been around for a while but did not so often go beyond the basics, trying to present in ways that were tactile, visual and aural. The range with MI is broad enough so hopefully no one will be left behind. Beyond the basic checklist of MI we can be on the lookout to discover a new intelligence. I would nominate culinary intelligence for the next up and coming category.

And the potential for intelligences interacting and not always being applicable to all situations is also intriguing. I am reminded of the brain surgeon who seemed to have all the requisite skills to be a very proficient tennis player. In this article, which is anecdotal, Gladwell (Gladwell, 1999), the surgeon is described as very proficient in his field. The article goes on to describe the way in which he sets goals and practices at his surgery relentlessly. I would guess that he has very high intra-personal intelligence. At one point, the surgeon decides to become proficient at tennis but despite his efforts, he doesn't attain as high a level as he thinks would be possible with the amount of effort he puts in. He was certainly highly motivated but perhaps it was an interpersonal intelligence that was not so developed. My point is that what we need to encourage is a potential that we might not see blossom within the confines of our course. We just can't be sure at this point how the MI interact and how they exclude one another. Fortunately teachers are used to the long wait for students to come back years later and say, 'now it makes sense to me,

what you were teaching.’ So by expanding our reach to the broad range of MI, we can capture more potential for more people, and, in the bargain, we can help develop an appreciation for diversity within and without our individual selves.

The basic problem of providing sufficient modes for all MI is really quite interesting. It is an advantage for students to work in groups. There is research that supports the effectiveness of this (George Jacobs in lecture spring 2006). It is also intuitive that language is a medium of exchange making group work an obvious choice. The question then arises: since this is usually an interpersonal intelligence type activity, how do we structure it so that it can include intrapersonal intelligence stimulation as well?

In this respect, I found very interesting the examples of group work offered by Surowiecki (Surowiecki, 2004), who, while coming from a more business decision making perspective, also supports the notion of group work. His tenets are that for groups to solve problems effectively, independent judgments should be made then aggregated and that each individual should be accountable. Just to offer one quick example of Surowiecki I will give a thumbnail sketch of the finding of the Scorpion, a lost submarine. To find the submarine, experts from a number of disciplines, submariners, engineers, mathematicians, et al., looked for independent judgments. These judgments were then combined through a formula and determined, within 60 miles where the submarine was. None of the independent judgments was so accurate. It sounds hauntingly like CL sourcebook premises.

I mention Surowiecki because I think the range of his anecdotes, solving problem simple and complex, cognition problems, coordination problems, and cooperation problems, offers many possible examples that I can use with my students, to help convince them of the efficiency of working together. He also give guidelines for effective group work. He has also created a rationale for using the different kinds of intelligences interactively, at least in some contexts.

So we have a rich pool of knowledge that we can draw on. The problem is getting everyone to pull together, the problems of coordination and cooperation.

I contend that there needs be an environment that is rich in presenting problem-solving modes in the classroom so each student can apply the problem solving patterns that are most available to each of them individually. For this to work there first needs to be an environment of mutual respect for MI’s. To make this happened I intend to create such an environment by explaining about MI and appealing to enlightened self-interest.

Some preliminary qualitative observations (the teaching as work-in-progress)

First I want to talk just briefly about my enthusiasm for MI as an organizing principle

for my lesson plans and activities. I feel that my respect for my students' ways of problem solving has been enhanced. I have always been eager to engage my students and have variety in my presentations and activities. But using MI as a framework makes this less haphazard. I know more specifically the variety of activities that I want to cover. I also find it easier to deal with particular students who have difficulties with assignments. In one case I have a student who is very intrapersonally oriented and she definitely wants to think things through before she proceeds, to have a clear step-by-step plan that she understands. I think at one time I might have encouraged her in another direction but now it seems clear to me what she is about and to allow her to follow her initial impulses.

For the goal of appreciation of their own diversity and that of others, I have introduced an activity in which the students list people who exhibit a particular kind of intelligence, a kind of genius. My class is a communication class, with an emphasis on listening and speaking skills. Our school is fortunate to have a chat lounge where the students can talk with a variety of English speakers from a variety of backgrounds (they are graduate students). I have given assignments to my students to find out more about particular kinds of genius. This is in addition to listing and categorizing group activities that we do in class by way of preparation. Although it is a little early to say, I sense from student questions and comments on the brief reports that they bring from the chat lounge that among my students there is an expanding awareness of the variety of problem-solving techniques MI represents. I will introduce a survey so that students can self-evaluate their MI inclination(s). I am introducing the elements slowly, in part to allow time for the prepared curriculum materials, and in part in deference to Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Difficulty. I am taking a step by step approach in this way because my students are still in the early stages of their second language development.

Although there are still some quizzical looks, I think that my students are grasping the concepts. I used a demonstration of the varieties of explanation possible with MI by explaining recursion in all of the possible ways with the MI framework of intelligences. This was before the 'listing of individuals with particular strengths in particular intelligences activity.' I felt this was successful and I will look forward to the survey results for the individual profiles.

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