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Making the most of Multiple Intelligences

For Herbert Puchta, a strong linguistic intelligence isn't the only key to success.

When I look back at the early years of my teaching, I used to use the term *intelligence* quite frequently – as an explanation for a student's success or failure. So, for example, I used to ascribe a high level of intelligence to students who achieved good results in tests or exams (in addition to the fact, of course, that I felt good as a teacher about their success). On the other hand, when students tended to achieve poor results, especially over a longer period of time and perhaps in spite of the fact that they worked hard, I would explain it by thinking that these students probably didn't have enough intelligence to succeed (and therefore, of course, the failure had little to do with me as a teacher).

I used these simplistic explanations in spite of anecdotal evidence that there are students who don't do very well at school, and yet become extremely successful later on in life! Likewise, as we know, not every successful learner ends up as a brilliant entrepreneur, scientist, physician, artist or teacher. These phenomena are interesting, since they may lead us to question the usefulness of seeing intelligence as

something that some people have a lot of and others only a little of, and to question the belief that the level of this thing called *intelligence* decides who will be successful in learning and in life.

Young Einstein

A newspaper reporter once asked Einstein when he had first had the idea behind the theory of relativity. The reporter was astonished when Einstein answered, *'When I was 12'* because he knew that Einstein had been a low achiever as a child. But Einstein assured him that what he had said was true, adding something like, *'When I was 12, I did a lot of daydreaming. In fact, in one particular daydream that I dreamt over and over again, I was sitting at the end of a light beam, riding into the cosmos. And I constantly asked myself the question: what would happen if I really was sitting at the end of a light beam now, riding into the cosmos, instead of sitting at my desk in school? If I really was shooting out into the cosmos, and if I was holding a mirror in front of my face, would I see my reflection in the mirror? Or would I – since I was already riding at the speed of light and the light couldn't overtake itself, so to speak – just see a black hole? These thoughts are the basis of the theory of relativity, and I first had them when I was 12 and my teachers thought I was an idiot.'*

Lessons to be learnt

This story is especially interesting since there is evidence that Einstein didn't speak until he was four years old and didn't read until he was seven. His teacher described him as *'mentally slow, unsociable and adrift forever in his foolish dreams'*. Isn't it fascinating that it was his ability to have these 'foolish dreams' that eventually made it possible for him to formulate the theory of relativity? Einstein, by the way, is not the only great mind who was regarded as not very capable, to say the least, by teachers or parents:

- Beethoven was said to have been a poor violinist. On top of that, his teacher called him *'hopeless as a composer'*.
- Walt Disney was not very successful as a newspaper reporter and was fired for *'lack of ideas'*! He was also in serious financial trouble several times before he built Disneyland.

- Rodin's father said, '*I have an idiot for a son!*', and the famous sculptor-to-be was called uneducable by his uncle. Rodin failed the entry test to art school three times.
- Last but not least, Leo Tolstoy dropped out of college. His teachers said he was '*both unable and unwilling to learn*'.

I think we can learn two things from these stories:

- Firstly, we need to be careful with labelling our students. A student who seems unable to get indirect speech, the present perfect progressive or simply the third person *s* right is not necessarily stupid, unwilling, incapable or destined to be a complete failure in life.
- Secondly, we are well advised to consider carefully the latest findings from research into human cognition. There are mountains of evidence that things are not as simplistic as that young teacher Herbert Puchta, pictured in the first paragraph above, thought they were. In fact, there is a significant body of findings that suggests that we should be rather wary of using the term *intelligence* in order to explain success or failure.

An experiment

! I'd like to invite you now to try a little experiment. Take two or three minutes to do the following task, and while you are doing it, observe how you are trying to get to the answer.

A man and a woman are going for a walk. They want to walk arm in arm, but their steps are of different lengths. In fact, the woman's step is two thirds of the man's step. They start at the same time, and their first step is onto their left foot (so they are both standing on their right foot when they make the first step). Obviously, since the woman's step is shorter and they want to walk together, she will have to take more steps than her partner in the same amount of time. How many steps will they each have to take before their left feet hit the ground at the same time again?

(From David Lazear)

Whenever I use this activity in teacher training workshops and ask the participants afterwards to share the cognitive and other processes that they went through as they tried to find the answer, a great variety of different methods are reported.

- Some try to picture the situation in their mind's eye. They often report seeing the scene 'as in a film' – and when asked further questions about the sub-modalities of that film, the answers vary from '*a full 3-D colourful video*' to '*black and white still pictures*' to '*blurred images of two people walking*'.
- Others try to work the problem out through maths, often in the form of a more or less complex equation.
- Yet others start drawing a graph on a piece of paper, with the man's steps first. They then divide these steps into the smaller steps of the woman and try to figure out the answer.
- In almost every group, there are some people who immediately grab a colleague and try to 'do' the activity physically.
- Some people start talking about the task with the person next to them or in small groups, whereas others have reported that they didn't want to be 'disturbed' and would have preferred a silent place and time to get to the answer on their own.
- Quite a few participants cannot help carefully analysing the *wording* of the task itself. Maybe there is a trick? Perhaps there is some kind of double meaning?
- On one occasion, a colleague even reported trying to solve the task in a 'rhythmical' way, ie by trying to 'tap out' the couple's footsteps!

From intelligence to intelligences

Through his pioneering research into human intelligence, Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, has clearly shown that there is no such thing as a single, unitary mental capability that can be called intelligence, but that there are instead multiple intelligences. Gardner argues very convincingly that IQ tests, and schooling in general, usually only draw

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on two of the human intelligences, the linguistic and the logical–mathematical. Gardner proposes eight different intelligences to account for a much broader spectrum of human capabilities that our thinking skills draw on – as we can see from the little experiment above. In fact, when used with groups, this activity quite frequently shows all or almost all of the intelligences specified in Gardner's work.

If you have tried the 'footsteps experiment' yourself, you can easily figure out which (or which combination of) intelligences you worked with as you were trying to solve the task.

Eight different intelligences

Intra-personal intelligence (self-smart)

When you are in this intelligence you are focused *in* (you are in what NLP calls 'down-time').

People experience this state of mind when they first wake up in the morning or on the way into sleep at night. A person who is strong in this intelligence needs time alone and will suffer if they have to socialise too much. Writing a diary no one else sees, getting deep into a book, or thinking much more than you ever say are some of the hallmarks of this intelligence. Intra-personally sharp students will often seem to be absentminded, and they might also seem slow to us. It is easy not to notice that they are involved in deep thinking while they just seem totally inactive to us, their teachers.

Inter-personal intelligence (people-smart)

As Gardner put it: '*The core capacity here is the ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals and, in particular, among their moods,*

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▶▶▶ *temperaments, motivations and intentions. Examined in its most elementary form, the inter-personal intelligence entails the capacity of the young child to discriminate among the individuals around him and to detect their various moods ... We see highly developed forms of inter-personal intelligence in political and religious leaders (as Mahatma Gandhi), in skilled parents and teachers, and in individuals enrolled in the helping professions ...'*

Logical-mathematical intelligence (number-and-reasoning-smart)

This intelligence can be associated with what is called 'scientific thinking'. It is often used in the analytical part of problem solving, when we make connections and establish relationships between pieces of information that seem separate, when we discover patterns and when we are involved in planning, prioritising and systemic thinking.

Linguistic intelligence (language-smart)

We use our verbal-linguistic intelligence when we write poems, create stories and are involved in conversations. Metaphors, similes, homophones and all kinds of linguistic jokes and puns give great pleasure to the linguistic intelligence.

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Musical intelligence (music-smart)

For a person with a well-developed musical intelligence, it can be tedious to be away from the world of beat, rhythm, tone, pitch, volume and directionality of sound for long. Therefore, if we want to meet the needs of this intelligence, we need to use jazz chants in our classrooms, sing the grammar, occasionally play music to help students relax, and even allow students to listen to music on their MP3 players while they are engaged in a writing activity.

Visual-spatial intelligence (picture-smart)

This intelligence is related to an architect's ability to picture a building in the mind's eye, and the ability to see a structure from all sides without difficulty. We can also expect air traffic controllers, sculptors, landscape gardeners and civil engineers to have highly developed spatial awareness. In children, the visual intelligence is about daydreaming, pretending to make themselves invisible, and making journeys to magical places and times in their imagination.

Kinaesthetic-bodily intelligence (body-smart)

This intelligence is about precision and perfection of movement. Ballet dancers, mime artists and athletes have a lot of this intelligence. The kinaesthetic intelligence is often about skills unknown to our conscious minds, like those used when we ride a bike, catch a ball, park a car, type on a keyboard, and so on.

Naturalistic intelligence (nature-smart)

This intelligence has been proposed recently by Howard Gardner to be added to the initial list of seven. It has to do with being in harmony with nature in the way that many early peoples were. It is about observing, noticing and understanding the rhythms and changes of nature.

Transferred to our language classroom, this means that whatever task we set our students, they will use different ways of thinking and getting to the answer. This is also stressed by David Lazear in his book *Seven Ways of Knowing*:

Transferred to our language classroom, this means that whatever task we set our students, they will use different ways of thinking and getting to the answer

- Intelligence is a multiple reality that occurs in different parts of the brain/mind system. There are many forms of intelligence and we have different ways of knowing, understanding and learning about our world. These undoubtedly go beyond what IQ tests can measure.
- While the intellect is pluralistic, at some level it is one. In problem solving, all of our intelligences work together in a well-orchestrated, integrated way. The stronger intelligences tend to 'train' the weaker ones to do their part in accomplishing an outcome.
- Intelligence is *not* an innate endowment, fixed at birth. We can enhance and amplify our intelligence. Limits to our intelligence are often self-made and are related to our beliefs about what is possible.
- Not only can intelligence change, it can also be taught to others. At any age, and at almost any level of ability, one's mental functioning can be improved.

ELT and MI

Those of us who agree that in our classrooms there will always be a wide range of different intelligences present, are nevertheless faced with the question of whether we shouldn't just carry on with what we have been doing all the time, for a number of reasons:

- If you are a teacher of young learners, you might say that you are already activating various intelligences in your classrooms – after all, pictures, songs, TPR activities and other 'motivators' are regular features of your teaching process.

- If you are a teacher of lower-secondary students, you might feel that you hardly have time to cover what the syllabus requires you to teach. After all, work on multiple intelligences is not part of the syllabus, and teaching teenagers with all their behavioural problems is challenging enough already.
- If you are a teacher of young adults, you might feel that you need to prepare your students for their school-leaving exams – and that it might be easy to find multiple intelligences activities for younger students, but a lot more difficult for students whose language level is upper-intermediate or above.

The advantages of MI work

If you identify with the primary teacher's voice from above, you are probably right that you are doing a fair amount of multiple intelligences work already. But even if you have never thought of applying the concept of MI to your *teaching* at all, your students have been *using* their various intelligences freely all the time, regardless of your intentions. So in a sense, your classroom has always been a multiple intelligences one.

Drawing on your students' various intelligences more systematically, however, and in a more reflective and purposeful way, may be very rewarding for both them and you. Inviting them to use their stronger and their weaker intelligences (we can only 'invite' students into intelligences, and never 'force' them into any) will probably have a number of clear advantages for your students and for you.

Teachers who regularly do MI activities:


- often experience that their students feel 'more addressed' in their lessons. This is hardly surprising: in a regular language class, it is the linguistically sharp students (the ones who have the same intelligence that language teachers usually have) who are regarded as intelligent by the teacher and therefore get a lot more attention and positive feedback. However, as soon as the teacher starts using activities that draw on their capabilities, those students who otherwise feel that the language

lessons have very little to offer them might become more interested.

- discover that language teaching offers an ideal opportunity to facilitate the development of thinking skills alongside linguistic skills. From the students' (or parents' in the case of young learners) point of view, this will give added value to the time spent in the language classroom.
- help their young or teenage students acquire social skills which are important for living together in harmony with others, and for using the foreign language more efficiently and communicatively.

Multiple intelligences work – a motivational asset

Although we can never predict what kind of thought processes a certain activity will trigger in our students' minds, it is safe to say that using MI activities is likely to activate a wider range of intelligences in our students than if language is only taught 'linguistically'. Consequently, more students are likely to feel 'addressed' in our class, and their level of interest in language learning is likely to rise, even if they do not belong to the group of people with a strong linguistic intelligence.

In the next issue of *ETp*, I will outline some MI activities which readers might like to try out for themselves. 

Gardner, H *Frames of Mind* Basic Books 1983

Lazear, D *Seven Ways of Knowing: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences* IRI Skylight Training 1991

Puchta, H and Rinvoluceri, M *Multiple Intelligences in EFL: Exercises for secondary and adult students* Helbling Languages 2005



Herbert Puchta is a teacher trainer and writer of coursebooks and resource books. His latest publication, co-written with Mario Rinvoluceri, is *Multiple Intelligences in EFL: Exercises for secondary and adult students*, published by Helbling Languages 2005.

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