

Finding (Multiple) Intelligences in High School Literature

We must evaluate the gifts God has given us to see how our personal learning and teaching styles can be adapted to reach students operating in different intelligences.

BY
NANCY
AUFDERHAR
HARLAN

Early in my first year of teaching, I attended a seminar at the California Association of Private Schools Convention. While there, I joined some 100 educators in taking a test designed to show how we learned and taught most comfortably. After the test was scored, the seminar leader discussed the results. She asked teachers with different letter combinations to raise their hands. Finally, I heard my letter choice announced. My hand shot up as I scanned the page in front of me trying to guess what the test results might say about me. Preoccupied with understanding my score, I did not look around to see who matched my test profile.

The leader said, "Please double check your letters. Are you sure that is your combination?" I rechecked my score. Yes, that was it. I held my hand high and continued studying the page in front of me, waiting for the expert's interpretation for our group. Instead, she said, "Are you sure you have read your score correctly?" Yes, it was correct.

Finally, I looked up to see who else

was in my group, but instead of finding comrades, I found everyone staring at me.

The teacher walked toward me, checked my paper herself, then said, "I've taught this seminar four times today, and you are the only teacher with this particular combination. Can you tell us what you teach?" And then came the zinger: "Or are you even a teacher?"

In the blur of embarrassment at being singled out, much of what this expert said was lost on me, but one comment remains very clear: "You are more like the majority of students than like most teachers." She went on to explain that my letter

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combination is one of the most common in the general population. Of course, the conundrum here is that most people do not become teachers, and those who do almost never match the average student's learning profile. At the time, I had not heard of Howard Gardner or his Multiple Intelligences Theory, but I remember that our seminar leader told the group that most teachers excel in verbal and mathematical areas.

In an ongoing effort to provide the very best learning for our students, many Seventh-day Adventist teachers have begun to educate themselves in the theory and practice of Harvard researcher Howard Gardner's notion of Multiple Intelligences (MI). And I suspect that, like me, many teachers had bought into Gardner's philosophy of education long before they read about it in the professional journals. I also suspect that this

rather idealistic viewpoint has caused some pain and frustration for teachers who had been flying blind, going on hunches and intuition, without much support from traditional ways of doing school.

In many cases, it is quite easy to identify students' primary intelligences. No fancy battery of tests is required to know that the sweet little social butterfly who can never keep from talking is probably most comfortable working in the interpersonal intelligence. Our body-smart (kinesthetic intelligence) students cannot sit still, while those whose math homework is filled with more creative doodling than equations are using their spatial/visual intelligence. Since intelligence is a gift from God, teachers who understand the MI theory will not try to change the way God made individual students, but will learn how to teach to

the intelligences God has placed in them.

Doing this requires that we re-educate ourselves as teachers. We must evaluate the gifts God has given us to see how our personal learning and teaching styles can be adapted to reach students operating in different intelligences.

Ideas for Applying the MI Theory

One of my favorite experiments since learning about the MI theory happened this past year in two sections of British literature. After studying "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," my class decided to stage a medieval feast to dramatize what we had studied. Of course, such a production needed an audience, so we invited Andy Sandiford's British literature class from down the hall (who had been studying *The Canterbury Tales*) to join us. We met for two lunch periods: First, Mr. Sandiford's class entertained us with an elaborate storytelling competition, mimicking what they had learned from Chaucer; then our class treated them to a royal feast, complete with the Green Knight holding his head under his arm.

Amazingly, I made no assignments for any of this. We brainstormed together for ideas during one class period, and then the students divided themselves naturally into groups to accomplish what they envisioned. They did not assemble according to their usual friendship cliques (even boyfriends and girlfriends did not stick together). Rather, students grouped themselves (unknowingly) according to their dominant intelligences! Alisson, a senior, organized the authentic medieval meal and table decorations. Mike naturally assumed a leadership position for gathering resources to create a castle atmosphere in the classroom. During the first planning session, Rebecca and Sabrina began creating a script and gathering willing actors to play the parts. Mood music and strolling minstrels became the focus of Tara and Edwin. A small group hung back initially and then gradually volunteered as much-needed helpers to make costumes, cut leaves, or figure out how to accomplish a believable "beheading." David, who swore he will never again be seen in green tights and a cape, rehearsed his lines to perfection, and surprised us all with his remarkable stage presence. With lights out

and candles flickering and my big round table loaded down with steaming bread-bowls of thick stew, platters of fruit, and our version of “mead” in large pewter goblets, I almost believed we had been transported back in time to King Arthur’s court with all its gallant chivalry.

While I basked in a kind of parental pride, it suddenly struck me that not once had the students asked, “How many points do we get for this?” or “Will this be on the test?” That for me was the stunning success.

Not everything I have tried has worked so well. Some strategies that fly high with one section fizzle, flop, or backfire with others. Being open to those possibilities is the daily challenge for teachers who embrace the MI theory.

Other Ideas

Some of the assignments that have consistently worked well in my classroom over the past several years are briefly described below.

Near the beginning of our Shakespeare class, students are given a “Life and Times of Shakespeare” assignment. I offer the class a list of topics related to Renaissance England, with enough topics so each student can choose one. After selecting a subject, students decide whether to work alone or with others. Each student is in charge of one topic,

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even if he or she also works in someone else’s group. Students do research and then present their findings to the class in whatever way they choose. Skits, sketches, baked goods, games, videos, reader’s theater, posters, and timelines have always been popular presentations. However, nearly every time, one or two future-teachers-of-America (our verbal/linguistic learners) read a well-documented report. I used to discourage this, but don’t anymore because that is how

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some students really feel comfortable presenting their work.

The strength of this assignment is twofold. Since the teacher controls the topics, the assignment can reinforce material already learned or lay the groundwork for future study and discussion. Since the students have complete control over what they actually produce to earn their grades, there is usually little complaining about the assignment, and students take real ownership of what they learn. And they have fun.

Literature classes offer rich and varied learning opportunities. Students who were present for “Upon the Burning of Our House” will never forget Anne Bradstreet, a Puritan housewife/poet, or her personal experience poem after seeing a tiny wisp of smoke waft up through a little chimney, then darken and billow through small square windows, and finally burst into flames that consumed a beautifully built balsa wood model house and died out just as its builders finished reciting this simple devotional poem.

Equally memorable was the reading of “Snake,” a 20th-century poem by D. H. Lawrence. It was pretty hard not to pay attention to the student up front reading poetry with a three-and-a-half-foot snake curling its way in and out of his master’s shirt.

Other projects may not be so dramatic, but can be visually breathtaking. For Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask,” one student created a stunning feather mask. Only when we looked very closely at this unique work of art did we see the tiny crystal tear gleaming in the corner of the eye.

The next semester, three students brought construction paper, glitter, glue, colored markers, scissors, and brown grocery bags to class. While one girl read Dunbar’s poem, the others passed out the art material to students, who then created masks for themselves while they talked about what kinds of masks people wear every day. It was a colorful, fun, noisy activity, but as I walked around the room, I overheard many serious and thoughtful discussions sparked by the reading of Dunbar’s poem.

One student, dressed in a traditional native American blanket of the Nez Percé tribe and carrying an antique rifle,

recited Chief Joseph's surrender speech with such clarity and emotion that when he finished, usually very cavalier students could not bring themselves to react immediately. They sat stunned by the power of the words of this great Native American leader. As their teacher, I felt tremendous sadness, and great pride; sadness for a brave group of people buried long ago, and pride for a student who helped us never to forget that time.

This past year, two girls worked together to design, construct, and model a beautiful long gray dress with a detachable hand-embroidered golden "A" on scarlet-colored velvet. For weeks before the projects were due, these girls faithfully brought their needlework to class and quietly stitched away during our class discussions of Hester Prynne and *The Scarlet Letter*. They were a visual symbol to us long before they stood up to present their handiwork to the class.

My literature students have impersonated game show or talk show hosts to interview famous authors and characters; they have given piano recitals, performed puppet shows, and treated us to high tea.

Impromptu Projects

Sometimes students' visions are larger than what they can reasonably bring to fruition in the time allotted. Other times, they feel overwhelmed with the cumulative workload of being high school students these days. For these reasons, I sometimes plan impromptu projects that require thought, but no specific props or preparation. When my class was studying the works of C. S. Lewis, I gave students Post-it notes with a character's name from Lewis' books folded inside, combined with a situation I had invented. Students assumed the proper roles, acting out the situations according to what the fictional characters might have done. (This, of course, came after a thorough discussion of characterization.) It was fun to do and see, and quick and easy to grade. It also offered an excellent opportunity to discuss why we knew a character would act in a certain way, and how we can predict what people will do based on our knowledge of their previous behavior. We talked about consistency, about authors "play-

ing fair" with their readers, and also how, as in real life, someone can totally surprise us by acting "out of character."

Helping Students Structure Assignments

At the beginning of each new term, one of my biggest challenges in introducing high school students to the idea of multiple intelligences is helping them structure their own assignments. By this stage in their educational experience, many students are jaded to the potential joy of learning. They have learned to cope with traditional school-as-usual. Even if they are bored or don't really learn anything, they can usually get the grades their families expect. I see this problem lessening, however, as more and more teachers catch the vision of joyful learning by giving students the opportunity to shape the ways they respond to course material.

Much of what I practice in my literature classes has been the result of luck—both good and bad—and following my natural inclinations about teaching. However, last year a colleague and I took a class from Dr. Melvin Campbell at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, that finally gave rhyme and reason to my trial and error. It is so encouraging to see solid scholarship that supports, refines, or corrects the direction of one's teaching.

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Assessment Concerns

One of the areas in which I felt the strongest need for help was that of assessment. I found a practical source for ideas on MI and assessment in Chapter 10 of Thomas Armstrong's *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994), one of the textbooks for Dr. Campbell's class. I strongly recommend that teachers seek out such a class. There are things to be learned, no matter how long one has been teaching, and I believe that Gardner's MI Theory is worth investigating.

If such a class is not available, meet with other teachers to read and discuss current literature on the topic. We need to keep growing and changing, experimenting, and listening to students.

Don't wait to try something until you have it all figured out and organized. Talk to other teachers. Read more professional journals. Write about your successes and failures to share with the rest of us. We can make classwork more meaningful for students and more enjoyable for ourselves! ✍

Nancy Aufderhar Harlan teaches ninth-grade writing and 11th- and 12th-grade literature classes at Loma Linda Academy in Loma Linda, California. She has participated in teaching multiple-intelligences seminars at La Sierra University, Riverside, California.