Rough LTC MI Panel Remarks

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Drew Dara-Abrams

This afternoon we are going to offer a few perspectives on how multiple intelligence theory is relevant to learning at Carleton. I will begin by providing some brief remarks to set the stage. I must admit that I am not an educational psychologist, but with over fifteen years of experience in the American educational system I do have some first-hand experience with education.

Let me begin by framing our discussion with an article from The Atlantic Monthly by the columnist David Brooks. In this article, which he aptly titles "The Organization Kid," Brooks describes his experience spending time with undergraduate students at Princeton, who he finds to be highly successful students—with impressive resumes and sky-high grade-point averages. Between attending classes, studying, doing community service, and participating in other extracurricular activities, most of these students have little time even to sleep. (Which I must admit certainly sounds familiar to me.)

Notice that all of these pursuits are goal-oriented. As Brooks puts it, "An activity—whether it is studying, hitting the treadmill, drama group, community service, or one of the student groups they found and join in great numbers—is rarely an end in itself. It is a means for self-improvement, résumé-building, and enrichment"—and all in a very limited sense. In letting themselves be guided solely by these goals—certainly with the support of outside forces, as Brooks proposes—the students come to treat their

education as merely yet another hoop that they have to jump through in order to lead a successful life. This article continues onto other topics, which are worthy of discussion, but this is the particular point I want to hone in on this afternoon.

The point that this limited view of learning as an activity structured as a means to an end defeats a good deal of the notion of education—particularly of education in the liberal arts tradition. Unfortunately, more and more it is only grades and other similarly limited measures that are considered as the ends of learning. This type of education may be productive on paper, but it is missing the intellectual excitement that I think is key to learning—and which is also the primary reason why I am choosing to pursue my education.

How does Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences factor into this discussion? Being in cognitive science, I am very intrigued by the psychological implications of MI theory. At the moment, however, MI theory is of value to us in a more practical manner. In breaking human intelligence down into various faculties—visual-spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, verbal-linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, naturalistic, and existential—MI theory draws our attention away from the procedural business of education—the syllabi, the course requirements, the assessment—and reminds us instead of what is actually involved in learning—harnessing all our existing intellectual abilities, making connections, developing new capacities. Thus, MI theory brings us back to the core of education and learning, which is too often forgotten—as seen in David Brooks's account, for example.

Gardner says that the central premise of his theory is that we are not all alike and we therefore learn differently. If you accept this principle, I contend that you cannot treat the process of learning as simply jumping through hoops.

With this foundation in mind, MI theory can provide us with a number of practical suggestions. In a moment, my fellow panelists will speak about such practical experiences that they have had with MI theory. Before continuing on to them, I would like to suggest a very rough framework for the various elements of learning which can be informed by MI theory.

First, the entry point. In other words, how are you introduced to a topic? Traditionally in higher education, the entry point approach most often used is that of lecture, which is a narrative discourse of a very logical manner. MI theory suggests that this approach may appeal to those who are strong in linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence but may not be so conducive to other learners. Giving consideration to the other intelligences as well—and the many possible combinations of them—can suggest to us other entry point approaches that may help the learning of certain people.

Next, there is the behind-the-scenes work. In other words, what do you do when you learn a concept, a skill, an ability? Often in the context of higher education this means studying. Here as well MI theory can provide assistance. I, for one, have greatly benefited from considering my intellectual strengths and weaknesses when choosing how to study. But let me hold off on providing explicit examples for one for moment.

Finally, we have the exit point. In other words, how do you demonstrate your proficiency in the topic? Everyone—students and faculty alike—knows that a particular

test is never a complete measure of one's abilities. However, MI theory, again, can suggest to us some more inclusive methods of assessment.

The experience someone has in a particular class is a shaped by a combination of these three pieces.

When considering approaches to take for the entry point, the "behind-the-scenes" learning, and the exit point, we are also by definition also considering learning styles. For example, I usually prefer to consider big-picture issues as opposed to finer points of detail and I prefer to work on my own instead of with others. Theoretically these differences, which can be called cognitive styles, are not part of MI theory. However, for the practical purposes of this discussion, they are worthy of inclusion. As Howard Gardner says, the key to multiple intelligence theory is that we are not all alike and we therefore learn differently.

Let me stop here so that we can move on to speaking about actual experiences at Carleton, keeping in mind our theme of multiple intelligence theory informing the processes of learning and teaching.

Note: I have played fast and loose with many aspects of multiple intelligence theory here. For more information on the theory see the work of Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1983) and *Multiple Intelligences* (Basic Books, 1993) in particular. Much interesting work on MI theory and its use is going on at Project Zero, the research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education of which Gardner is a part. For example, the entry-point framework approach, which is the product of David Perkins, among others, is one of their projects to which I make vague reference. See also *Intellectual Character* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) by Ron Ritchhart of Project Zero. Unfortunately, Project Zero focuses mainly on K-12 education and has yet to give much consideration to post-secondary education.

For more on learning styles, see *Thinking Styles* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) by Robert Sternberg.

David Brooks's article appeared in the April, 2001 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and is also available on-line at http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/04/brooks-p1.htm.