What's the Big Attraction? Why Teachers are Drawn to using Multiple Intelligence Theory in their Classrooms

by Leslie Owen Wilson

I don't know why

In the spring of 1994 I found myself sitting at an all day conference with hundreds of others in Green Bay, Wisconsin listening to Howard Gardner speak on varied topics. Although most of the participants were educators, and there specifically to hear more about his Multiple Intelligences Theory (MI), Gardner clearly wished to speak about other things. However, he devoted the first half of the morning session to a discussion of MI and fielded related questions. During this time Gardner admitted that his academic peers and the scholarly psychological community had been less than enthusiastic to his MI Theory (Gardner 1993). Gardner went on further to express his surprise and amazement as to the immense success and popularity of the concept among educators.

The voices of teachers:

For the past seven years I have incorporated Gardner's MI concepts into two of my university courses. I have used the concept in both my graduate theories of learning class, and to a lesser degree in my undergraduate sections of educational psychology. Through these experiences I have noticed that my students have developed strong preferences for using techniques related to Gardner's work.

My students who are practicing teachers are extremely vocal on the topic. Indeed, I have just completed grading fifty-two comprehensive masters' exams. From this exam group there were three students who took a question from my theories of learning class. In my graduate exam question I asked participants to choose and explain two theories which had been helpful in either changing their teaching practices, or which had help foster a better understanding of learners' differences. Students choosing to answer this question have a broad range of theories and theorists to select from, however, most students invariably have chosen to discuss the impact of MI as one of their two choices. Again, like the vast majority of students before them, the three students who chose to write on this question this time sang the praises of the transformative nature of MI theory and described how it helped them change their perceptions or diversify their teaching practices.

What's the attraction?

Some specific reasons why teachers like MI:

My perceptions, combined with those of my many students, may help define a basis for understanding why both current and future teachers are so taken with Gardner's ideas. Here are some of the most common reasons my students educators seem to be drawn to using MI.

MI theory:

- Has been adapted and interpreted by many intermediate writers who have made it easy for both teachers and parents to see the value of the concept and its applicability to uses in the classroom. This broad range of interpretations at intermediary levels makes related techniques easy to understand and use by both preservice and practicing educators. Also, due to the proliferation of medial interpretations, related conference presentations and accessible classroom materials ( in addition to associated articles for parents in current media ) MI has become so popular that the concept has become much like a grassroots movement.

- Aids teachers in easily creating more personalized and diversified instructional experiences

- Offers teachers assistance in helping students become empowered learners by extending and promoting cognitive bridging techniques based on the seven intelligences; by fostering deep metacognitive understanding; and by advancing suggestions for a broad array of diversified study skills techniques.

- Helps teachers explain and promote understanding at intrapersonal, interpersonal
A tool for understanding self and others: While it is as a practical and effective tool for

- Taps into students' intrinsic levels of motivation through natural talents, thus helping teachers construct self-motivating educational experiences and ones which help promote the concept of flow in the classroom.

- Often validates teachers' insightful and intuitive assessments of students' natural talents and offers them justifications and assistance in creating related personalized educational accommodations and experiences.

- Provides teachers, parents and students with a more extensive and egalitarian conceptualization of giftedness.

Details:

Intermediate authors: As many educators know, currently a number of authors have adapted Gardner's concepts specifically for classroom use. These writers have used MI as a basis for creating teacher-friendly techniques that can be readily used with students of varied ages. Also, these works offer teachers diverse choices for implementation because their works differ greatly in sophistication, complexity, focus and price. Recently, Gardner reported that MI "has become a minor industry. There are about fifty books on the topic and probably the same number of people who make a living partly from giving talks on the subject . . . (Davies 1996)."

Thus, much of the attraction to MI appears to be directly related to the fact that numerous educators have discovered Gardner's concept on their own, through the broad range of commercial works available. Other educators have learned about the concept from enthusiastic peers who have tried related practices with success, or from peers who have attended a professional conferences, workshops or classes conducted by presenters using Gardner's ideas. In addition, simplified versions of MI descriptions have not only appeared in professional magazines for teachers but also in newspapers and popular magazines, thus alerting and informing many parents and caregivers of the theory's basic principles.

This fact has caused many to people to question teachers about students' related gifts. Because teaching concepts related to MI generally produce self-efficacious students, parents who have had children in classrooms where MI techniques are being used, often verbalize their appreciation of the concept and its results to successive teachers. In these contexts, MI has become much like a grassroots movement started at the bottom of the educational pyramid by inspired parents and teachers, as opposed to being initiated from the top by educational policy makers, school boards, administrators, or curriculum directors.

Some of the authors who have made an impact in this area are David Lazear, Thomas Armstrong, Linda and Bruce Campbell, and Robin Fogarty. In fact in several of the works by the aforementioned authors, Gardner himself offers a forward, a preface, a chapter or related chapters or some form of written endorsement supporting the interpretation of his work. These intermediary writers and their related presentations have helped to create accessible bridges from the Gardner's conceptual, theoretical framework directly into classroom practice, again, making the theory easily understandable and applicable to educators at very practical levels.

When listening to my graduate students discuss MI and its numerous classroom applications, it becomes very apparent that much of the popularity of Gardner's theory comes directly from the efforts of these many intermediary authors and not from their direct knowledge of Gardner's parent works (1983, 1993). Because Gardner has opened his work to the care and interpretation of others, much of the concept's popularity appears to relate directly to the ever-growing proliferation of well-versed disciples.

Help with diversifying instruction: Again, mostly due to exposure to the instructional frameworks provided by intermediary authors, my undergraduate students learn to use Gardner's ideas to help diversify and revise lesson plan assignments. Many of my teaching graduate students develop firm attachments for related reasons but more specifically because instructional planning techniques based on MI principles help them easily create interesting, clearly differentiated components for integrated units. MI frameworks also help with updating and expanding older lessons and curricula with minimal effort. In these contexts, practicing teachers grasp on the concept because it is an accessible tool that is adaptable for a broad range of curricular applications.

Aids students in becoming empowered and in finding bridging techniques and study skills: Many of my graduate students report that they also use MI techniques in their classrooms to help create instructional bridges into difficult concepts. Because MI related techniques are very versatile, they serve as ways to create clearly differentiated or personalized instructional bridges and supportive scaffolds for students having difficulty reaching levels of independent learning. MI techniques help teachers convey the importance of different types of metacognitive functions and help them introduce related types of study skills and mnemonic devices to students. When applied to pupils' individual metacognitive levels, knowledge of MI categories and related methodologies can assist learners in functioning more effectively and independently.
Currently, many of my graduate students state that they are grappling with the many or comprehensive view that every child has a gift or combined gifts. This from Gardner's other designated categories—bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, based on MI have the potential to include students having gifts, or combinations of gifts, students who are designated as gifted are reflective of this narrow cultural and educational assess verbal-linguistic or mathematical-logical skills. Historically, programs that service repeatedly points out, Western perceptions of intelligence are often limited to tests which correct and valuable parts of their teaching personas. The validation of natural talents: Many good teachers operate at highly observant and intuitive levels. Part of the artistry of teaching revolves around gut feelings and keen observational skills. However, sometimes teachers operating at levels of intuitive artistry are made to feel that their opinions and assessments of students are trivial, wrong or less valid when compared to profiles developed from verifiable and quantifiable types of traditional measures. In this context, knowledge of MI's definitions of intelligence helps to validate many teachers' qualitative or intuitive assessments of students. Many of my teachers report that this aspect of MI theory is reassuring in affirming that their instincts are correct and valuable parts of their teaching personas.

A more egalitarian conceptualization of giftedness: As Gardner (1983, 1993) repeatedly points out, Western perceptions of intelligence are often limited to tests which assess verbal-linguistic or mathematical-logical skills. Historically, programs based on MI have the potential to include students having gifts, or combinations of gifts, from Gardner's other designated categories—bodily-kinesthetic, musical, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and soon to be elaborated, naturalistic intelligence. This broadened array greatly appeals to those teachers and parents who hold a more egalitarian or comprehensive view that every child has a gift or combined gifts.

Due to my exposure to the multiple intelligences, I have found out that he is very smart in many ways that I am not. He's quiet and knows how to really listen to people, is especially good at working with kids, and often sees beyond people's obvious exteriors. He can fix anything! Obviously, he's good at sports, but he also knows who is, what he's good at, and what he wants to do with his life. He also has lots of common sense! My family and friends are wrong! Thanks for helping me see that he is intelligent in many ways. While MI techniques serve as a basis for elevated appreciation at interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, related information inherent in Gardner's initial conceptualization can also aid in understanding cultural differences. As Western cultures tend to value verbal/linguistic intelligence and logical/mathematical intelligence, Gardner points out that other cultures value other types of intelligence (Gardner 1983, 1993; Armstrong 1994). Because Gardner included as part of the foundation and justification for his theory the different perceptions and anthropological evidence of cultural variations in defining intelligence, teachers can use this related knowledge to help students develop an appreciation of other cultures. (The issue of heightened multicultural understanding is also very valuable to teachers as well.) Levels of interpersonal understanding can be extended as students and their teachers begin to comprehend and celebrate the talents inherent in others, and this type of awareness can then be extended to a recognition of others' cultural roots. This component creates an additional, and very useful tool for teachers trying to expand students' multicultural attitudes and perceptions. Again, many of students who are educators support this view offering testimony from their own experiences.
professional challenges which surround inclusive practices. While, generally, my students seem to accept the underlying philosophical constructs of inclusion, their major concerns appear to be related to questions of implementation, to administrative levels of support, or to their own levels of professional training. But one of the more common philosophical views that is continually voiced is that inclusive practices serve only limited numbers of students—those who fall into narrowly prescribed categories at both ends of the intellectual spectrum. Graduates speaking out on related issues point to the fact that special, categorical designations provide for unequal funding and time commitments and leave the majority of students unserved or supported by special programs, specialists, federal or state mandates or funds, enrichment programs, or the like. My teachers appear to hold the opinion that the lack of support for differentiated instruction for average students is one of the glaring inequities in educational practices in the United States. In these instances, many of my students believe that MI has the potential to serve as a foundation for justifying expanded notions of giftedness and for extending the definition giftedness to broader populations.

Conclusions:
While the answers to understanding the educational popularity of MI Theory fully undoubtedly lie in many directions, the key issues to comprehending the theory's burgeoning acceptance seem to be related to the basic needs of teachers as they try to create more inclusive, affective and effective instruction. These basic teaching needs are primarily related to promoting understanding and appreciation among students, to creating classrooms where learners experience a sense of loving and belonging, to issues of fostering pupils' esteem, personal intellectual empowerment and self-motivation, and to helping teachers achieve more diversified instructional techniques. Simply, MI Theory has taken hold in classrooms across the United States because it helps educators meet the needs of many different types of learners easily, and because it reflects teachers' and parents' deeply rooted philosophical beliefs that all children possess gifts and that part of the most important mission of schools is to foster positive personal development. Thus, teachers understanding and using MI theory, and its related educational frameworks and explanations of diversity, are being transformed into teachers who understand human patterns, human diversity and human learning at better, deeper, and more comprehensive levels.

References:

About the author
Currently, Leslie Owen Wilson is an assistant professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point where she teaches courses in educational psychology, theories of learning, curriculum, and creativity. She has also been a classroom teacher, reading teacher and teacher and developer of programs for highly able and creative learners for over thirteen years in Maryland, Georgia and Oklahoma. Her doctorate is from Oklahoma State University in Curriculum and Instruction with additional emphasis in gifted and talented education and educational foundations. In addition to her varied scholarly and professional pursuits, Leslie has also written the book, *Every Child, Whole Child: Classroom Activities for Unleashing Natural Abilities*. 1994. Tucson, Ariz.: Zephyr Press, and has just completed the manuscript of another book, *Journeys: Inside out, seeking wholeness*. Both books bridge theory into practice for teachers and use multiple intelligence theory and holistic learning as their foundations. She has also contributed a chapter on the importance of educational rites of passage experiences in *Perspectives on the unity and integration of knowledge* for Peter Lang Publishing. UW-SP has recognized her outstanding contributions in the area of instructional delivery with an university teaching excellence award.

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