Applying Multiple Intelligences in Adult Learning Environments

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Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences has been quite influential in the development of a variety of teaching methods and curriculums, and is considered to be one of the most influential concepts of psychological/educational theory of the 21st century. Even Gardner himself has found all of the attention given to his work very flattering; however, he has also come to accept the many errs in interpretation the overwhelming interest in his work has created (Encyclopedia of Informal Education, 2010).

For the purposes of this paper, which is to evaluate the application of Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory for the benefit of adult learners, we will utilize the definition of multiple intelligence best summarized by McCoog (2010): “categorizing HOW people are smart as opposed to how smart they ARE”. For the most part, Gardner’s multiple intelligences have been the basis for a number of experiments and ideologies, which have primarily been developed for the benefit of school-aged children. Does Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory have any practical applications to adult learning and adult educational theory?

As noted by the Encyclopedia of Informal Education (2010), Gardner initially identified seven intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, body-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner later added a naturalistic intelligence, and considered adding an existential and a moral intelligence, but felt they failed to meet the criteria necessary to be considered. Although often confused with learning styles, multiple intelligences differ very greatly from learning styles. Prashing (2005) identifies a learning style as the preference of the learner, whereas multiple intelligences specifically address the ability of the learner.

*Models and Theories of Adult Education*

Several theories and models of adult education support Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. Knowles’ (2005) andragogical model of adult learning has several tenements that address both intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. For example, Knowles (2005) theory dictates that adult learners benefit greatly when allowed to draw from their personal experiences in order to enhance their learning. Knowles (2005) states, “The richest resources for learning reside in adult learners themselves”. This aspect of Knowles theory connects directly with intrapersonal intelligence, as it involves having the ability to use the knowledge one has about oneself in order to better control their life situations (Gardner, as cited by the Encyclopedia of Informal Education, 2010).

Similarly, Knowles’ (2005) orientation to learning ideology contends that adults are “life-centered” as opposed to children who are “subject centered”. That being said, adult motivation to learn is drawn from the belief that they will be able to utilize what they learn in their lives (Knowles, 2005). This motivation also relies heavily upon intrapersonal intelligence.

 Intrapersonal intelligence and interpersonal intelligence are also supported by the learners’ self-concept component of Knowles’ (2005) andragogical model. Within this component, not only do learners accept responsibility for the decisions they make and their own learning, they also express the need to be recognized by others as being capable of making these decisions (Knowles, 2005). Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand others, and this understanding encourages positive communication and exchange of ideas (Encyclopedia of Informal Education, 2010).

There are other models of adult learning that support a combination of intelligences as well. Swanson and Law, Whole-Part-Whole Learning Model, which is cited by Knowles (2005), is an excellent example of a model that can be adapted for the benefit of spatial and logical-mathematical intelligences. Within this model, the learner is presented with an outline of the concepts they will learn, or, “the first whole”. “The first whole” enables the learner to make a mental picture of the overall task at hand. There are a variety of techniques instructors can use to assist students to develop clear mental imagery. Two mentioned by Swanson and Law, as cited by Knowles (2005) are advance organizers and schema alignment. Taylor-King (1997) suggests that adult students may use spatial intelligence to “enhance understanding of basic relationships among discrete parts of a conceptual whole”.

The “parts” component of Whole-Part-Whole theory is based on behaviorist ideology that dictates instruction through activity (Swanson and Law, cited by Knowles, 2005). Taylor-King (1997) states that adults thrive in learning environments centered on the body-kinesthetic intelligence, which supports Gardner’s contention that the mind and body work together to enhance learning. The logical mathematical intelligence is also exercised during execution of the “parts” as it enables the learner to connect them together to form the “second whole”. It is important to note that the “second whole” relies heavily upon logical-mathematical intelligence because learners must be able to organize the “parts into a whole on their own in order for the new knowledge to become useful” (Swanson and Law, cited by Knowles, 2005).

Other Recommendations for Using Multiple Intelligences

Taylor-King (1997) recommends instructors either avoid, or use other methods to enhance, classroom activities for the verbal-linguistic intelligence. Verbal-linguistic intelligence is heavily dependent upon reading and lecturing, which is “subject centered” and is therefore reminiscent of pedagogical teaching methods (Knowles, 2005). As learning relates to musical-rhythmic intelligence, Taylor-King (1997) does recommend use of rhymes and music to assist adults in settings wherein rote memorization is crucial. However, in terms of the use music as an environment enhancement in the adult classroom, Taylor-King cautions that some adults prefer to study in silence, and advises educators to assess the needs of the student before implementing this strategy.

In regards to the naturalistic intelligence, which as indicated in the Encyclopedia of Informal Education (2010) “enables human beings to recognize, categorize and draw upon certain features of the environment”; Taylor-King (1997) advises educators attempt to connect any possible interests students may have related to the preservation of nature and the environment to activities in the classroom

Gardner’s multiple intelligences were designed to address dispel the notion of intelligence as “a single entity that was inherited”, and to encourage the idea of there being multi-dimensional intelligence, that when used in concert with adult educational theory can enhance any educational program, providing adult learners with the groundwork necessary to ensure success (Encyclopedia of Informal Education, 2010).

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