Multiple Intelligences: Reflections After Thirty Years
Howard Gardner
©Howard Gardner 2011

I first developed the theory of multiple intelligences (often called “MI theory”) thirty years ago. The theory was based on my own research with normal and gifted children and with adults who had suffered various forms of brain injury; I synthesized this research with other bodies of work, drawn from several scholarly traditions. At the time I concluded that all human beings have at least seven relatively independent intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal); we differ from one another in the relative strengths of each intelligence. Each intelligence can be nurtured—the effort needed reflects the relative strength of the intelligence. Since the original publication, I had added an eighth intelligence (naturalist) and have considered various other intelligences (existential, pedagogical) but the main lines of the theory have not changed.

As a psychologist, I assumed that my theory would be of interest primarily to my academic colleagues; but as the essays in this newsletter indicate, the major interest has come from educators, both in the United States and abroad. In fact, in 2009, we published a book Multiple Intelligences Around the World, in which 42 authors, from 15 countries on 5 continents, talked about how they had used these ideas. And so, in turn, a lot of my own efforts have been directed to how the idea of multiple intelligences might be useful for curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

I’ve concluded that there are two major educational implications of the theory: individuation and pluralization. Individuation begins with the insight that we all learn in characteristic ways; teaching and learning are most likely to be effective if our individual ways of knowing are taken into account. The more we, and others, understand how we learn, the more likely that we will be successful learners. In the past, only the wealthy could receive individualized education; but now, thanks to personal computers (and to their successors, smart phones), for the first time in human history, we all can and should have the opportunity to learn in ways that are comfortable and effective for us.

With the deluge of information available at the click of a mouse, no one can hope to acquire everything that is known. (Nor need we!) Instead, we need to focus on those ideas, concepts, and methods that are most crucial. Once these have been identified—no easy task, to be sure—those pivotal forms of information should be presented in several different ways—that is what pluralization is about. This is not to say that every topic needs to be taught in 7 or 8 ways—but we should endeavor to present crucial ideas in a number of ways that are intellectually valid. By doing so, we achieve two goals: 1) we reach more individuals, because people learn differently and represent knowledge differently; 2) we show what it is like to understand something. If we understand a topic well—family, home, hobby—we can describe and convey it in more than one way.

(Continued on page 4)
Without doubt, the ideas of individualized education and multiple modes of presentation existed before I (or anyone else) came up with “MI theory”. What the theory provides is a definition of an intelligence, a set of criteria for determining an intelligence, and a categorical scheme which organizes both individualized forms of instruction and multiple ways in which to convey knowledge. And that, I believe, is the best way for discoveries in the human sciences to be applied in the daily lives of human beings.

Howard Gardner is the Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He has just been awarded the 2011 Prince of Asturias Prize in the Social Sciences.

Relevant Websites
- [http://www.infed.org/thinkers/gardner.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/gardner.htm)
- [http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html)