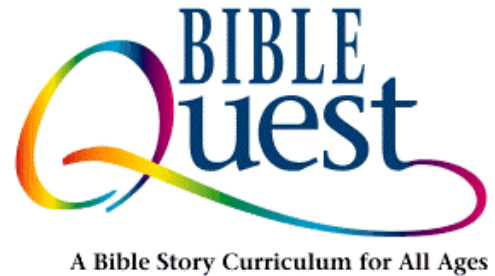


Leader Article



Many Ways of Learning

Think about a group of people, any age. You might call forth your immediate family members, your siblings, the people on a church committee, the group you lead. What is unique about each individual? Does one person write well, and another keep good track of what is being accomplished at a meeting? Does this person regularly help the group (family or committee) form a community; and does another person function best alone? Is one person always moving, working best when her whole body is in action? Does yet another person always seem to be humming under his breath, no matter where you are? Does still another notice the tiniest change in the outdoors, even in the dead of winter?

Our lives would be far less rich if all our friends and family members were just like us. Fortunately, in God's creation, that is not likely to happen. Observe any group for a while and you will find that each person is unique. Yet, when we prepare to teach, we often look at a group of children, young people, or adults and expect that they will approach the subject matter in exactly the same way. The theory of Multiple Intelligences helps us look at how we can teach differently.

Howard Gardner and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

A decade or more ago, Howard Gardner, Professor of Education at Harvard University, published findings from his research on the development of human cognition capacities in *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1993). In this book, he defined intelligence and described several kinds of intelligences. This book and others that followed have quietly revolutionized education, particularly elementary and secondary programs, in many settings. At last the time has come for Christian educators to ponder this research as well.

Gardner's major premises, that we learn in many ways and that no one way of learning is better than any other, are not difficult for Christians to connect to the gifts of the Spirit and the many parts that make up the body, each having its own worth and value (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). A field of research now supports what we have long said and what many teachers have long practiced. Yet we have generally followed the lead of the culture around us and in our education, from the Sunday church school to the church seminary, have awarded pins, ribbons, and scholarships primarily on the basis of the verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. Still, we know that each person in our family, that each child in our group, that each committee member and each congregation member has a value and a contribution to make to the whole, to build up the body of Christ. The theory of Multiple Intelligences provides a way for us to view those different gifts as we minister and learn together.

What Is Intelligence?

According to Gardner, an intelligence is the ability to

- solve problems encountered in real life
- generate new problems to solve
- make something or offer a service that is valued within one's culture

Gardner also devised a list of criteria that each intelligence must meet ranging from its functions' being identified in a particular location in the brain to having a peculiar vocabulary or set of notations. For more about the criteria, read *Frames of Mind*.

What Are the Multiple Intelligences?

To date, eight intelligences have been identified, although Gardner suspects there are many more. We all have each intelligence, although we prefer some over others. These are our strong intelligences, the ones we go to first when given a choice. Each intelligence has a broad range of activities. For example, the musical intelligence ranges from the person who can sing an aria to the one who can successfully learn Morse code. Keep that in mind as you read about the intelligences.

The first four intelligences might be viewed as object-related intelligences, for the objects we encounter shape them.

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence. This is the ability to use numbers, scientific information, and logic. Persons naturally high in this intelligence learn through the use of abstract symbols, the testing of hypotheses, and the search for patterns and relationships among diverse ideas or objects. This intelligence is easily seen in accountants, computer whizzes, and anyone who enjoys solving problems. Although this may seem the opposite of faith, this intelligence can be seen in many kinds of theological discourse.

Naturalistic Intelligence. This intelligence, the one most recently identified, is the ability to observe nature, defining it and caring for it. This intelligence calls forth the naturalist or, in the light of the Genesis creation story, the steward. For these persons, learning comes from the natural order around them. They may be farmers, botanists, or birdwatchers. They may discover a special relationship with God as they discover the wonders and awe of the universe.

Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence. This ability uses the tactile senses and the body to understand and remember information. Even when seated, these persons are likely to move a foot or tap a finger. They are athletes, dancers, and mimes. They look for direct interaction and participation with the subject matter and are keenly aware of the physical environment, as well as their own bodies. Developing this intelligence helps us connect the body and spirit.

Visual-Spatial Intelligence. This is the ability to see, as well as construct, images and to manipulate them. The person who uses this intelligence to a high degree is observant and can often translate what is heard into a visual sign or symbol. Artists, architects, and interior decorators prefer this intelligence. Whereas this intelligence may help us create a personal symbol for our relationship with God, it is also important in helping us understand traditional symbols of Christianity. The stained-glass windows or banners in the sanctuary feed immeasurably a person for whom this is a primary intelligence. The next two intelligences can be classified as object-free intelligences because they are not dependent on the physical world that we encounter.

Linguistic Intelligence. This is the ability to use words, in spoken or written form. Persons who make much use of this intelligence learn through writing, reading, discussing, or listening. Examples of persons with this as their dominant intelligence are writers, storytellers, and preachers. We have often focused on this intelligence in Christian education and in many other aspects of congregational life.

Musical Intelligence. The earliest intelligence to identify in an infant, this is the ability to use musical sounds, rhythm, and tone. Although successful musicians surely have this intelligence, it is not tied to performance, but to the way we use music to learn. Therefore, this intelligence is as central to the rock star as to the opera buff. The person high in musical intelligence often uses rhythm as a means to learn something and finds music, listening or performing, an important way to express emotions. In the church, of course, we have long recognized the role that music, singing or listening, plays in our worship life, allowing us to praise God beyond the words we say.

The last two intelligences are person-related intelligences, as is obvious.

Interpersonal Intelligence. This intelligence, necessary to creating community, is the ability to form relationships with others. Persons with a high interpersonal intelligence prefer to complete projects with others rather than work alone, and they easily form friendships. Counselors, teachers, and figure-skating pairs use this intelligence extensively. To use this intelligence in the church school, we plan group projects and fellowship time. The church, the community of faith, has much need for the development of this intelligence in each member. It is the basis of our ministry with one another.

Intrapersonal Intelligence. This intelligence focuses on the interior of our lives. Through it we learn about ourselves and how to deal with others. It is an important intelligence for freelance writers, as well as mystics. This intelligence allows us to develop a self-image, as well as a private spiritual life. An active intrapersonal intelligence engages us in the major questions of life and purpose. This, too, is an important component for the community of faith.

Multiple Intelligences and Christian Education

This understanding of the uniqueness of the individual and multiple ways of learning about the world, God's world, undergirds the sessions in *Bible Quest* for all ages. As you will quickly realize, few activities can be identified solely with one intelligence. For example, a popular activity for children is creating a group collage. Although a collage might initially be considered an activity that calls forth the spatial-visual intelligence, a group collage also requires interpersonal intelligence. If the children must find pictures related to a specific topic or category, they are also calling upon their logical-mathematical or perhaps their naturalistic intelligence.

The same is true in an activity for adults that initially looks like a discussion, an activity closely tied to the verbal-linguistic intelligence. Sometimes a discussion is introduced by having the participants ponder a question first on their own, using their intrapersonal intelligence and perhaps their logical-mathematical intelligence, depending on the question. Or the topic may be presented in a piece of art or a symbol, drawing upon the visual-spatial intelligence.

As you look at a session, do not expect to find every intelligence prominently used. Some, such as interpersonal and verbal-linguistic, will appear in virtually every session. Others will not, although you should be able to identify activities for all intelligences over several sessions. Of course, you should feel free to adapt any session to your group, playing on the dominant intelligences you find among the group members. Be aware that you will likely think first of activities that focus on your primary intelligences. Coming up with activities for the others will take more thinking on your part or recruit the help of

another leader with different dominant intelligences to give you an idea or two. You can offer the same help to someone else.

Remember, we each have all these intelligences and probably many more. We consider these ways of learning not only so each person will connect with the topic, but in order to broaden the learning potential of each person in our group. As you plan the sessions you will lead, and as you think about the persons in your group, look for ways to include many intelligences. Your being aware of these several ways of learning will make it more likely that those you lead will encounter God's word in entrancing and life-changing ways. And you will too.