
How Adults Learn

Most of us (if we're over 50) have a conservative view of what it means to learn or "get an education." Our early education consisted of sitting in desks, with pencil, paper, and textbook. We read, discussed, and did exercises based on our reading. Heaven help the kids who couldn't read!

Today, educational theory has revolutionized how we think about learning. This applies to children, youth *and* adults. As educators (and learners) our goal is to have vibrant, interesting, engaging lessons that change people and give meaning to life. It's a lofty...but achievable...goal. In the church our ultimate goal is to lead others in the journey of deepening their faith and commitment to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. It's a lofty and life-giving goal.

Why educational theory helps

Many educational theories help us understand how people learn. One of the most helpful has been that of Howard Gardner. Gardner uses the term "multiple intelligence" to refer to the number of different ways that we prefer to learn.

According to Gardner's research, we each have a preferred approach to learning. For instance, you may say to me, "Dorothy, you need to learn how to use a new program on the computer. How do you prefer to learn it?" My strong preference would be to get out the manual, read through it and figure out what to do. You, on the other hand, may prefer to take a class, experiment with the program and ask the instructor what to do when things go wrong.

What are the "intelligences" Gardner describes?

Gardner outlines eight intelligences. I prefer, when working with adult groups, to think of them as two clusters.

Cluster 1:

- Verbal/Linguistic intelligence
- Logical/Mathematical intelligence
- Visual/Spatial intelligence
- Body/Kinaesthetic intelligence
- Musical/Rhythmic intelligence
- Naturalistic/Environmental intelligence

Cluster 2:

- Interpersonal intelligence
- Intrapersonal intelligence

The "intelligence" of famous people

The concept of multiple intelligences will make more sense if I give you some examples of famous people who had highly honed preferred intelligence.

- Verbal/Linguistic: Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton
- Logical/Mathematical: Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking
- Visual/Spatial: Tom Thompson, Pablo Picasso
- Body/Kinaesthetic: Wayne Gretzky, Vince Carter
- Musical/Rhythmic: Oscar Peterson, Alanis Morissette
- Naturalistic/Environmental: David Suzuki, Chief Dan George

All of us have a preferred way to learn...and more

Each of us can identify our preferred way of learning. (You'll have a chance to do this later on p. 6.) As well, we can also probably identify secondary ways of learning. I know, for instance, that I have a strong preference for verbal/linguistic learning. Give me a book, a crossword puzzle, a discussion group...I'm happy. But, if those were not available, I would also be quite content to use my musical/rhythmic intelligence or my visual/spatial intelligence. I am not quite as comfortable using the other three intelligences. The same goes for Interpersonal and Intrapersonal intelligence. Most of the time I prefer to learn alone (intrapersonal) but occasionally I enjoy learning with others (interpersonal).

Why is it important to know this?

If you are a teacher, it is important to understand that you have a large collection of preferred intelligences in your class. In fact, if you had a group of 15 adults in a group and you gave them six different choices of activity based on the six intelligences in Cluster 1, they will more or less divide themselves up evenly. I know this to be true because I have done it dozens of times in workshops.

This raises several questions:

1. Why do I need to discover a person's preference?
2. How will I find out the learning preferences of my group?
3. When I find out, how will it affect what I do in a learning environment?

Why do I need to find out a person's preference?

The main reason — and it's a good one: your learners will be happier, more engaged, and learn more when you structure their class around their preferred learning styles. In other words, your class should offer *at least* two choices of different learning activities. Happy learners make happy teachers, too. You will see your group blossom and grow.

People behave better when you use their preferred learning style. It's easy to see "misbehaviour" in a children's class: they "act out," are disruptive, talk when they are not supposed to. It's harder to spot misbehaviour in an adult learning environment, but it is still there. They chat about things irrelevant to the topic at hand. They "drift off," or "space out," or "vote with their feet,"—just don't come back to the next session.

It is also important to discover others' learning preferences because they may be different from yours. As a leader, I, for instance, have a strong preference for verbal/linguistic activities. But, if I only choose word searches, reading, and discussion, I will structure my lesson so that it only appeals to a fraction of the learners in my class. There is a natural inclination for a teacher to plan activities that he/she enjoys, but we need to expand our methods so all are included.

How will I find out the learning preferences of my group?

It's quite easy. You can use one of two methods. The first is easier. The second is more fun.

Method 1

Photocopy the following chart adapted from Barbara Bruce's book, *7 Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults* (Abingdon Press, 2000). The first time you meet, ask people to quickly fill it out and put their name on the sheet, explaining that it will help you structure the class so you can be a better teacher.

Most Favoured Ways of Learning

Please check your most favoured ways of learning. Check only the items that you most often use when you choose to learn something.

Listening

Reading

Talking with friends

Studying alone

Writing something out

Studying to music

Creating a logical plan

Drawing a picture

Creating a map of the learning

Singing while I work

Writing a song

Hearing a nature lecture

Creating a rhythm

Pacing while thinking

Walking in the neighbourhood

Telling it in my own words

Writing it down

Studying the stars

Seeing a video

Creating a sequence of events

Touching/moving objects

Experiencing it

Seeing pictures

Asking "what if?" questions

Teaching something to someone

Touching objects

Doodling

Journaling my thoughts

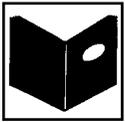
Watching a thunderstorm

Learning the statistical reasoning

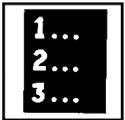
When people have completed their questionnaire, you can ask them to self-rate and draw their own conclusions as to what their preferred style might be. (Use the symbols below for self-rating.) Or, you may gather their sheets and tabulate yourself, telling them that this will help you provide an interesting class for them.

Answers to "Most Favoured Ways of Learning"

Although the activities in the chart may be placed in several of the eight categories, here are the most likely places for them to fall.



Verbal/Linguistic: Listening/Writing it out/Writing it down/Reading/Telling it in my own words. (Verbal/Linguistic intelligence is one of the more widely used — reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Perhaps we attain a stronger preference for this intelligence because so much of our early school years focus on verbal/linguistics. Verbal/Linguistic people love to settle down with a good book on a snowy evening.)



Logical/Mathematical: Creating a logical plan/Creating a sequence of events/Asking "what if" questions/Learning the statistical reasoning. (Logical/Mathematical skills are expressed in things like problem-solving, time lines, creating meaning and order, linear and sequential thinking, mathematical formulas. Logical/mathematical people love to make a "Saturday morning list!")



Visual/Spatial: Creating a map of the learning intelligences/Seeing a video/Seeing pictures/Doodling/Drawing a picture. Visual/Spatial intelligence is engaged when we see or imagine. (Visual/Spatial people love to go to the movies or a tour of the art gallery. They tend to "forget" if homework is orally assigned but not written down because they need to see it to remember.)



Body/Kinaesthetic: Touching objects/Pacing while thinking/Experiencing it. (Body/Kinaesthetic intelligence incorporates physical movement as it relates to learning and makes good use of the five senses. These are the men in your congregation who say, "Don't ask me to go to a Bible study, but give me a hammer and nails..." or the women who say, "I'm not much for meetings, but I'm happy to make the coffee for coffee hour.")



Musical/Rhythmic: Writing a song/Creating a rhythm/Studying to music/Singing while I work. (Musical/Rhythmic intelligence uses sounds, rhythms, beats, music, and tempo. These are people who are in the choir or may come to a Bible study if it is based on Handel's Messiah. These are teens who are delighted to make up a rap and sing it for the congregation.)



Naturalistic/Environmental: Walking in your neighbourhood/Watching a thunderstorm/Hearing a nature lecture/Studying the stars. (People with strong naturalistic/environmental intelligence are in close touch with their environment — they notice the full moon, they notice the changes in their neighbourhood, they are in tune with the changing seasons and may become politically involved to protect sensitive land areas or water. Many of Canada's First Nations people have a finely tuned naturalistic/environmental intelligence.)



Interpersonal: Teaching something to someone/talking with friends. (Interpersonal intelligence uses synergy and interactive energy in learning. It is important not to equate this with "extroversion." Some people who are introverts still have a strong desire to learn with others.)



Intrapersonal: Studying alone/Journaling my thoughts. (People with a highly developed intrapersonal intelligence prefer reflection and quiet time to help learning sink in and make meaning of it. They are the people who say, "I need a little time to think this through.")

In running multiple intelligence workshops, it has been my experience that people invariably tell me that they move back and forth between Interpersonal and Intrapersonal, depending on what they are learning. That is certainly true for me. For instance, if I were to use my linguistic intelligence and begin to learn about the history of the town where I live, I would want to do that alone (intrapersonally) but if I were to explore the nuances of contemporary Canadian literature, I would want to do that with a group (interpersonally).

Method 2

Back on page 5, I said that there was a second way to discover the learning preferences of your group members. You can do it the experiential way. First, study the information about multiple intelligences on the preceding pages. Suppose you are starting a four-week Bible study. At your first meeting, set up two or three activity centres. After introducing the content of the session, give people a choice about where they would like to go. They will naturally gravitate to centres where they feel comfortable and which express their preferred learning style. Simply make note of where people go and you will have a sense of what type of learning activities to plan for the next session.

If the multiple intelligence theory is new to you — be brave and try it. Whether you are a teacher or a learner, you will enjoy the wonderful learning journey of becoming closer to God, through Jesus.

May God's wise Spirit guide you.

— Dorothy Henderson