

When Cultures Connect

Multiple Intelligences Theory as a Successful American Export to Other Countries

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This chapter describes contacts between the theory of multiple intelligences (MI theory) and three different cultural contexts: the teaching of a high school lesson plan based on MI theory in a suburb of Beijing, China; the Norwegian practice of nature education in an *utskole* (outdoor school) and its relationship to the naturalist intelligence; and the paradox of a pluralistic theory (MI) being adopted by monistic Western religious traditions. In each case, the cultural contact is a favorable one, and reasons are explored as to why MI theory has been so successful in integrating its Western cultural bias with the values and beliefs of other cultures. The fact that MI theory has as part of its core structure a deep-seated appreciation for the manifestations of intelligences in cultures around the world is seen as a primary reason for its success as an American export to other shores.

Cultures are like chemical elements. You can mix two of them, and you might get something useful like water or table salt. But you might also blow up the kitchen. When Portuguese Jesuits came to the Mughal Emperor Akbar's court in sixteenth-century India, they were astonished when the Muslim emperor prostrated himself before images of Christ (Dalrymple, 2007). But when Admiral Perry sailed into Uraga Harbor near modern-day Tokyo in 1853 and was told by representatives of the Tokugawa shogunate to proceed to Nagasaki for limited trading, Perry threatened a naval bombardment before Japanese officials relented and reluctantly let him come ashore (Walworth, 1946).

In a similar though not nearly so dramatic way, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (MI theory) represents an expression of American culture that has increasingly been exported to other cultures over the past two decades. In this chapter, I examine how MI theory has fared in these cultural contacts and determine where along the spectrum of cross-cultural acceptance, from enthusiastic prostration to threatened bombardment, MI theory can be placed in this potential collision of cultures. In particular, I explore three different cultural encounters that I have personally experienced: classroom observation in the People's Republic of China, the experience of *uteskole* in Norway, and reflections on the acceptance of MI theory in fundamentalist and orthodox cultural and religious traditions in the West.

There is a strong multicultural component in MI theory. At the core of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is the assertion that each intelligence represents the manifestation of culturally valued products and the formulation and solving of culturally relevant problems. In establishing his set of criteria or prerequisites for what an intelligence must contain, Gardner writes, "I recognize that the ideal of what is valued will differ markedly, sometimes even radically, across human cultures, with the creation of new products or posing of new questions being of little importance in some settings. The prerequisites are a way of ensuring that a human intelligence must be genuinely useful and important, at least in certain cultural settings" (Gardner, 1983, p. 61). I believe that MI theory has been well received by cultures around the world precisely because the eight intelligences embody capabilities that are found in virtually all cultures. All cultures have systems of music, literature (or oral traditions), logic (even if hidden under symbolic structures; see, for example, Lévi-Strauss, 1966), social organization, physical formation, pictorial expression, intrapersonal integration, and nature classification. In essence, cultures can easily recognize themselves in these eight manifestations of intelligent activity. MI theory, in this way, has a bit of the chameleon in it, ever shifting its colors to meet the specific cultural expressions it encounters in each society around the world.

At the same time, MI theory itself is a culturally valued product (as well as the outcome of a set of problems posed and perhaps resolved) that is specific to a particular social and historical context: the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As such, it brings with it certain types of cultural values that are implicit in American culture. Perhaps foremost among them is the idea of pluralism—the belief that there are many truths, not just one overarching truth, and many ways of knowing and thinking (see, for example, James, 1966; Berlin, 2000). In addition, MI theory reflects the American value of pragmatism, as seen, for example, in the works of John Dewey (a clear precursor to Howard Gardner in the history of American education), William James, and, more recently, Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1989;

James, 1991; Dewey, 1998; see also Menand, 2001). In this respect, MI theory is to be judged not by its ability to solve central truths in philosophy (such as an absolute definition of the nature of intelligence) but rather by its “cash value,” that is, its operational ability to generate new questions, ideas, programs, discourses, and strategies in psychology and education. (This point deserves to be well taken by recent critics of the theory of multiple intelligences who have consistently attacked the theory for its “fuzziness” and lack of empirical support; see, for example, Waterhouse, 2006.) There is also a sense of the good old American values of optimism and individualism contained within MI theory, as can be seen in the work of many practitioners around the United States (see, for example, my own self-help books: Armstrong, 1999, 2000a, 2002). This includes the idea of American “can-do-ism”—the belief that every person can reach his or her full potential—as well as the value of using creativity or innovation to come up with novel solutions to difficult problems. Finally, MI theory embraces the value of egalitarianism, wherein each of the eight intelligences has relative equality with the other seven, and individuals possessed of superiority in the Western elitist academic domains of linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence are no longer necessarily deemed worthy of retaining their unquestioned hegemony in the educational arena or in the intellectual marketplace of ideas.

Given this background, I examine my own experiences in observing multiple intelligences adopted or applied in three different cultural contexts. First, I look at a trip that I took to the People’s Republic of China in August 2002 for a conference organized by the Beijing Institute of Education. At this conference, I presented a lecture and also had the opportunity of seeing a lesson taught using multiple intelligences at a high school in a suburb outside Beijing. My wife and I sat at the back of the classroom while a teacher in her twenties or thirties taught fourteen-year-old students a lesson about the Irish singer, songwriter, actor, and political activist Bob Geldof, who was one of the chief organizers of the Live Aid rock concert simulcast from London and Philadelphia in 1985 that raised \$150 million for worldwide famine relief. While the students practiced their English, they proceeded to provide statistics about the event; share music, lyrics, and images; interact socially; plumb their own personal emotions; and even put on a role play about Geldof’s life.

As I watched the lesson proceed, I found my jaw dropping as I realized that I was observing something that I had never seen before: an exact demonstration of an ideal multiple intelligences lesson plan as I had envisioned it in my book *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Armstrong, 2000b). My first reaction was one of elation. During previous visits to MI classrooms, I had never seen such a lean and tight presentation of a lesson that tied specific strategies to a clearly identified instructional objective. Too often what I had seen in previous classroom visits were simply typical examples of children

working at projects in a manner consistent with the ideals of progressive education, open education, and constructivist learning (not that there is anything wrong with that). What was new for me here was an approach to learning that was distinctively multiple intelligences and not to be confused with any other approach. Of course, there was more than a little pride welling up in my throat as I watched my own book being demonstrated in living color in front of me six thousand miles from my own home shores.

But then another reaction set in. The question, “Am I looking at the real thing?” passed through my mind. Was what I was seeing in this classroom in a Beijing suburb simply an artificial orchestration of my lesson plan instructions designed to impress the author? Or was there something going on at a higher level that was more along the lines of “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery” or even reflections of a noble Chinese ideal? I had read Howard Gardner’s book *To Open Minds* (1991) about his experiences visiting China in the 1980s and was aware of the Chinese proclivity in art toward copying as opposed to creativity. In the course of the book, Gardner struggles to reconcile himself with the Chinese value system of exact replication of artistic masterpieces and the way it contrasts with the American value placed on creating something brand new. He seemed by the end of the book to have reached a rapprochement, at least to some degree, with imitation as an artistic ideal alongside creative originality. Perhaps, here too I could appreciate the fact that the classroom teacher had created something that accurately reflected what I had spent years cultivating and refining in my own writings and practice.

When we were in the bus going back to the conference headquarters, the teacher of the lesson asked me what she could do to improve on what she had done. Frankly I was so impressed with the lesson that I couldn’t think of a single thing, except, sad to say, a suggestion that she had spelled the name Bob Geldof wrong—that it was spelled Geldorf. This, I later found out, was not correct. The teacher was right; I was wrong. I had had a close friend with auditory discrimination problems tell me about Geldo[r]f’s work a few years before (or perhaps it was I who had the auditory discrimination problems). This little gaff underlined for me again the fact that maybe exact imitation is not such a bad thing after all.

The second cultural encounter relates to my experience visiting Norway in 2005 when I attended a conference in Skien, Norway, Henrik Ibsen’s boyhood home. During that trip, I had an opportunity to visit the Kollmyr Skole (School) in Skien to see elementary school children engaged in a variety of practical and academic tasks reflecting the wide range of multiple intelligences. What impressed me the most was what Norwegians call the *uteskole*, or outside school. *Uteskole* is part of a larger naturalist framework in education in Norway called *friluftsliv*, which can be roughly translated as “outdoor nature life”; it encompasses a range of physical activities in nature, most of which

have environmental and cultural dimensions. The Web site of the Parliament of the United Kingdom notes that *friluftsliv* is a defining aspect of national identity in Norway (Higgins, 2004). One can certainly appreciate this, looking at the vast expanses of nature in Norway, the strong emphasis on winter sports like skiing and tobogganing, and the rich elements of nature in their folklore and literature (note, for example, Edvard Grieg's orchestral work, "In the Hall of the Mountain King," based on a section of Ibsen's marvelous play *Peer Gynt*). As a result of this all-embracing vision of nature education, most of Norway's elementary-school children spend a full day each week of the academic year engaged in outdoor learning, much of it occurring in a lean-to structure or hut, called a *gapahuk*, which is set apart from the regular school.

I happened to visit Kollmyr Skole during a day when nine- and ten-year-old students were at one of the two *gapahuker* at the school making replicas of prehistoric Norse cooking utensils from fallen branches of trees and other natural materials. I remember that it started to rain, and I reflected at the time that the typical reaction of an American educator to these circumstances would have been to round up all the students and head back to the warm school building, which in this case was located several hundred yards away along a winding dirt pathway. Nobody headed toward the school. There is a motto at another *uteskole* in Norway: "There isn't such a thing as bad weather, only bad clothing" (Ellevoll Oppvekstsenter, n.d.). The backpack-bearing children had come to the *gapahuk* prepared for the rain, and they pulled out and put on their windbreakers, caps, jackets, and other "good weather" clothing and continued to engage in their activities.

Kari Birkeland, the principal of Kollmyr Skole, communicated to me that students who have been struggling with the indoors classroom (the regular classroom instruction) often do particularly well when they are outside. Another *uteskole* teacher commented, "I have noticed lots of children with 'ants in their back' [a Norwegian expression] who don't like our education in front of the class, and many teachers give them up and give them a diagnosis [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, is common]. But I have seen children bloom when they can be outdoors, and use their bodies. Children who can't spell their names, can dig a tunnel and be smart 'constructional [sic] engineers'" (I. M. Misje, personal communication, December 19, 2007). This appears to agree with research in the United States that green environments help individuals labeled ADHD concentrate and learn more effectively (Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001).

This particular instance of cultural contact between MI theory and Norwegian outdoor education differs from the Chinese example cited above in that it is not MI theory that is bringing something new—a lesson planning strategy—to the table, as was the case in the People's Republic of China. Rather the Norwegian ideal of *friluftsliv* is offering something new to MI theory: a framework

within which the naturalist intelligence (as well as each of the other intelligences) can develop and flourish. Up until my contact with the *uteskole*, most of my observations of the naturalist intelligence at work in schools in the United States consisted in the occasional garden, terrarium, ecology curriculum, or classroom pet that I would see during my classroom visits. What particularly impressed me about the *uteskole* was its all-encompassing vision of outdoor learning.

The educator who was my contact while visiting Skien, Mette Bunting, pointed out to me in a recent communication that all of the learning that can take place inside a school building can also take place outside in the *gapahuk*. This reminded me of various strategies that I had written about in my book *The Multiple Intelligences of Reading and Writing* that related to the outdoors—for example, “read outside,” “spell outside,” “write outside” (Armstrong, 2003). It is far more difficult to bring the outdoors inside than to do indoor activities outside. It also reminded me of certain exotic aphasias reported by psycholinguist Steven Pinker, wherein an afflicted individual has the ability to name things that are found outside but not inside or can name living things but not nonliving objects (Pinker, 1994). There seems to be a proclivity toward naturalist activities in the brain, which makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, since our species has spent far more time learning to survive in the wilds than living in framed and insulated buildings. This very fact seems to underscore the importance of using *friluftsliv* in other countries and cultures around the world. Mette Bunting told me that in some kindergartens in Norway, children spend the entire day outdoors. This flabbergasted me, coming from an American culture where kindergartens are increasingly having their nap, recess, and play time cut back to provide more time for developmentally inappropriate formal academic learning (Swidey, 2007). Clearly the *uteskole* is a cultural gift to the theory of multiple intelligences and in particular to the naturalist intelligence, especially in the way MI theory is practiced in the United States.

Finally, I make some reflections on what to me has been a somewhat puzzling phenomenon: the broad acceptance of the theory of multiple intelligences in at least certain segments of the orthodox and fundamentalist wings of all three major Western religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The reason I say this is puzzling is that MI theory seems to be rooted in an American ideal of pluralism, where the concept of many truths is acknowledged. The fundamentalist or orthodox cultural and religious traditions that I have had experience with as an MI writer and practitioner seem to embrace more of an ideal of monism, the sense that there is only one truth embodied in the specific religious traditions, beliefs, and practices of a particular faith. I have done multiple intelligences training for Torah Umesorah, an orthodox Jewish educational organization; seen Gardner’s work discussed favorably

in fundamentalist Christian publications for parents (see, for example, Tobias, 1994); and had my book *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (2006) translated into Arabic by a Saudi Arabian publisher. From my perspective as a non-Muslim, this last form of acceptance has been perhaps the most mind-boggling. I recognize that my reaction stems, perhaps in large part, from the onslaught of narrowly focused media coverage in the United States after the events of September 11, 2001, and in part from the distorted views that non-Muslim Western cultural sources have promulgated about Islam over the course of many centuries (Said, 2003). Yet it still startles me when I see an article on the Internet entitled “Reforming Pakistan’s ‘Dens of Terror,’” claiming that Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is being favorably taught and received in the madrasas of Pakistan (Schmidle, 2007).

I can venture several explanations as to why MI theory has been so well received in these seemingly narrowly focused cultural and religious contexts. First, there is a strong component of learning in each of these faiths, and MI theory is seen as a means of supporting that tradition. In Judaism, there is a folk tradition of providing a young child with his or her first alphabet board smothered in honey so that the child will always associate learning with sweetness. In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner cites the tradition in Islamic schools of memorizing the Qur’an (Gardner, 1983). One might add to this the long tradition in Islamic culture of explorations in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, history, geography, poetry, and many other fields of study (Esposito, 2000). Second, there are in these religious traditions, elements that emphasize alternative ways of learning that are superior to a traditional academic intellectual approach. The story that I use most often to begin my multiple intelligences keynote speeches and workshops is “The Grammarian and the Boatman,” which is from Sufi poet Jalal al din Rumi’s monumental work the *Masnawi*, one of the masterpieces of Islamic and world literature (Jalal al din Rumi, 2002). In this story, a grammarian criticizes a boatman for making grammatical mistakes, only to encounter a storm in a boat and hear the boatman chide him for not being able to swim. The idea that there are many different kinds of abilities is a theme that runs through all religious traditions. In Christianity, there is the well-known story of the “investment of one’s talents” in Matthew 25:14–30. An Algerian educator I have been in contact with recently is investigating the relationship between multiple intelligences and the multiple—there are ninety-nine—names of Allah (Abdelhak, 2008).

There is also the matter of looking at this acceptance from the other side of the equation as well. What has MI theory done to accommodate itself to these cultural and religious traditions? I suggest that perhaps the major contribution in this regard is Gardner’s finding a place in the theory for the religious impulse (in the candidate existential intelligence), while rejecting the idea of a “spiritual” intelligence that could have brought with it a great deal of

controversy among different religious groups. After all, whose idea of spirituality would be incorporated as authoritative? Gardner (2000) notes, “The belief spokespersons for spirituality [claim] that spiritual concerns lead to an encounter with a deeper or higher truth. . . . There is a specific content—a spiritual truth—to which only some or only those who have followed a certain path have access. And this slippery slope leads all too often to a belief that the truth can be divided between those who qualify on some spiritual, religious, or philosophical ground and those who do not. . . . Here, we have left the realm of intelligence and moved to the sphere of dogma” (p. 56).

Gardner has provisionally adopted the idea of an existential intelligence, which has no fixed dogma or belief connected with it yet acknowledges the existence of individuals who have a higher capacity than is common to see visions, to influence others ethically, reflect on religious and philosophical questions, and excel in other pursuits related to ultimate life questions. Hence, there is something like an MI theory for each religious faith to identify with in terms of a well-regarded scientific model with Harvard backing that validates their own practices. I suggest also that even Gardner’s giving only provisional status to existential intelligence—holding it apart, as it were, from the rest of the theory—may serve as a kind of pragmatic strategy to lessen the potential for conflict, were the intelligence given full-fledged membership in the MI pantheon.

Although each cultural encounter described in this chapter has its own unique features, in all three cases, there has been a favorable outcome in the interaction between MI theory and the values of the respective cultures. The Adorno-Perry scenario was avoided! The reason for this goodness of fit between MI theory and diverse cultures appears to reside most strongly in the theory’s capacity to validate each culture’s traditions, not simply at the high cultural level (published literature, music, science, and others), but also at the level of a nation’s folk traditions, its core national identifications, its aesthetic ideals, and other subtle dimensions of a society’s deep cultural practices.

In addition, a parting word should be appended here acknowledging Gardner’s personal openness to the application of his theory to a wide range of cultures as a major reason for the theory’s success worldwide. With regard to Gardner taking his ideas and making them relevant to their own unique circumstances, Gardner (2000) has written, “In general, my advice has echoed the traditional Chinese adage: ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom’” (p. 89). By taking this approach, Gardner has ensured that MI theory will continue to flourish in many cultures for many years to come.

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