Inclusion and the Multiple Intelligences: Creating a Student-Centered Curriculum

No two learners are alike. Confronting this fact leads to both the great challenge and the great pleasure of teaching. Yet there are patterns, and in this article, Jennifer Borek, with the help of the work of Howard Gardner, helps the reader find some of those similarities. Her focus on finding ways to help special needs students confront the persuasive essay is particularly relevant in an era of standards and accountability.

JENNIFER BOREK

The concept of multiple intelligences (MI) that Howard Gardner introduced in his 1983 text, *Frames of Mind*, is a principle well known to most teachers. Gardner believes that, rather than a single intelligence, we possess many intelligences in varying doses. These intelligences include, logical, mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, kinesthetic, naturalistic*, existential, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. As most of us understand that we are better at some things than others, it is difficult not to accept, in theory, Gardner’s concept.

Yet how can the classroom teacher committed to the personal growth and skill development of each of her students in a crowded classroom make practical use of this understanding? Since all of our students have each intelligence, it makes sense to address as many of these intelligences as possible in our classrooms and in our lesson plans. All students want to frame their work in the best possible light and learn in the way that will “stick.” Empowering students to learn through multiple modalities fosters a collaborative classroom where students are comfortable experimenting and letting others experiment. Over a period of years at various teaching venues, I have worked with my students on identifying the characteristics of these varied intelligences and planned with them learning strategies that will work with each. Here I want to describe how I used Gardner’s ideas to teach a particular skill in a particular setting.

When I taught English at an alternative school in southern Illinois, my students came exclusively from low socioeconomic-status households. Most read at least four years below grade level and had voluntarily or involuntarily left the public schools to attend our school. Our students were between the ages of 15 and 19, and were almost 90 percent male. Many were diagnosed with learning disabilities and some also had behavior disorders. A significant number had both. All of my students came with the emotional baggage that tends to accompany chronic and continuous school failure.

*Author’s note: In the discussion that follows, I do not consider the naturalistic modality.

**Multiple-Intelligences Approach to Outlining and Drafting a Persuasive Essay**

I wanted to help this mixed bag of young people to be able to outline and draft a persuasive essay. Of course, the linguistic modality, with its focus on manipulation of language, is always involved in all English class tasks. But by involving additional activities geared to other modalities, I was able to help students not so comfortable in the linguistic mode become more at ease working in the language arts.

But how were the students and I to determine which modality worked best for each of them? I’d developed a matrix of activities for each intelligence that I posted in the classroom. [See editors’ note, page 28.] After I posted these lists, I talked to my students about different approaches to the same task. They would...
generally have additional helpful suggestions, and they would critique my list for ideas they thought "too babyish" or generally unhelpful. I was seeking activities that would be individual enough to incorporate any students' learning goals and personal interests. Students were able to pick their own activity from the list, or develop an alternative activity, as long as it was suitably rigorous to develop the position they would need for their persuasive essay. While students were required to write an essay for themselves, during this development process, they were allowed to work in groups.

In this early stage of their persuasive piece, the students were expected to develop an "outline," though their planning did not need to be done in the typical linear Roman numeral format. My goal was to help students learn the drafting process that worked best for them so they would be better able to express their thoughts and more willing to write in and outside of class. Here, I describe the outlining process for some of my students as they focus on the intelligence right for them.

**Logical-Mathematical.** Students favoring this modality think in logical patterns. They organize information systematically and are probably quite organized. There is the occasional logical-mathematical learner whose locker is messy, but even then the ideas in her head are not.

These learners have trouble with certain tasks in English that require nonlinear thought. Sometimes in English class we want students to summon up emotion or practice holistic skills, and these students will struggle with those assignments. Writing poetry, creating murals, and journaling may be difficult for them. In general, they will be most comfortable and productive during grammar exercises, writing outlines, using Venn diagrams and story maps (if they are spatial learners as well), and creating and solving puzzles.

Specific to persuasive essays, logical-mathematical learners may have a difficult time since they often see the world more in patterns than in emotions. So while they certainly may have the easiest time creating a classic debate-formatted paper that flows logically from an outline, their presentation might seem emotionless and, therefore, less persuasive. And although outlining is very much a logical/mathematical activity, it can be challenging even for the most logical-mathematical of learners. My favorite outline substitute for logical-mathematical learners is to have these students format a rough draft or outline as a series of questions and answers to flesh out both sides of the argument. Questions can be written in the order that they come into the writer’s mind but then should be cut apart or written on 3" x 5" cards and put in an order that follows a logical pattern that leads through supporting ideas.

In my alternative school classes, my logical-mathematical students found structuring their rough drafts in this way helpful to creating a balanced argument. One student had chosen to write his persuasive essay on divorce and how it hurts children. He asked, ordered, and answered a series of questions that began with knowledge seeking (When divorce becomes popular, how do things change for children?) to creating synthesis (How can we design what happens prior to marriage to increase the chances of a couple staying together?). These questions gave him direction for his essay and made the initial drafting process easier.

**Linguistic.** Students who are highly linguistic or who excel at reading and writing usually have an easier time in English class. They might even enjoy grammar as much as many English teachers do. They often keep journals, even when not required to, and enjoy many varieties of creative writing. Highly linguistic students with disabilities such as dyslexia may have difficulty learning to read but still exhibit many other signs of a high linguistic intelligence. They take pleasure in word games, puns, and other types of verbal humor, easily memorizing poems or stories that have been read to them, and generally demonstrate high verbal analytic ability. In general, these students are most comfortable and productive when we allow them to use the full range of their linguistic intelligence, both auditory and written.

One of my own favorite approaches to outlining is highly linguistic. I like to think through papers by writing "outline sonnets." When I described this technique to my students, most gave me a look that was telling me they would rather chew glass than complete such an assignment. But the highly linguistic students perked up and gave it a try. As with my own outline poems, the quality of the poems was not as important as the clues it gave them about how to structure their papers. Sonnets and limericks were the most popular forms, though some students created a series of couplets. One student created this limerick:

*If I want to vote at my age
And no longer live in the cage
That turns adolescents
Into convalescents
Recovering from democratic rage.

This gave him the basic premise for his
Inclusion and the Multiple Intelligences

side of the argument that young people who are able to vote will feel less isolated and angry. He was able to use this idea to think through, in a fun way, the support for such a position.

Highly linguistic writers may want to draft the paper rather than creating an outline of any kind. This is fine with me. I believe I need to honor their writing process. On occasion, students have created a poem outline from a rough draft as a way of condensing their thoughts.

Musical. The musical modality includes a lot more than music. Students favoring this mode of learning tend to be highly distracted by sound. I myself am a musical learner. I keep my door closed when I teach, as the hall noise bothers me and makes me lose my train of thought. When I notice a particular student becoming sidetracked by hall noise, pen clicks, or other in-class sounds, it is likely that I’ve identified a musical learner. These students love listening to stories, poetry, and plays aloud. They may volunteer to read sometimes, but they may also enjoy the sound of others’ reading more than their own.

Musical learners may have trouble writing in class, since we generally are unable to create a completely quiet classroom. Since a consistent level of sound is preferable to random noise for most musical learners, I’ve found it helps to play quiet, rhythmic music during independent activities, or I allow students to bring a cassette of their own music to play while they work. This allows them to focus on the task at hand rather than the intermittent sound in the room.

In general, musical learners are most comfortable and productive when they can join their love of sound patterns with the language arts. This means a great deal of their work is done auditorily. Many of these students will want to go through the preliminary writing process with other students or a partner so that they can discuss the process and hear the information as it gels.

I help musical learners through the process of planning a persuasive essay by encouraging them to create cassette tapes of their arguments. While doing research, many of these students carry their recorders with them so that they can record sound bites from TV and radio. (Collecting can even be expanded to include appropriate sound garnered from Internet sites.)

In my alternative school class, some students actually used the words of songs to help them construct their argument. One student who was particularly interested in racial equity issues used Bob Dylan’s song about Hurricane Carter as an outline for his essay and then gathered other information to support the point of view that Carter was unjustly convicted.

Spatial. Students favoring this modality enjoy highly visual experiences. Textbooks are frequently uninteresting to them unless they include interesting visual components. I stress interesting here, because many textbooks merely throw in an occasional photo or color without regard to its meaning in the context of the writing. Spatial learners want to see the connection between what they visualize and what they read. They tend to think in pictures—in three dimensions—rather than in words. This means that when they write they are quite literally translating their thoughts from a visual language.

These students often have trouble with logical-mathematical and linguistic tasks that are highly abstract and not easily pictured. For instance, grammar terminology may throw them until they have a chance to diagram sentences, which will give them an opportunity to create a graphic translation of the language. I encourage spatial learners to draw pictures in their notebooks and journals in order to stimulate their writing.

In the alternative school setting, several spatially-oriented students created comic strips to outline their papers. They could more easily develop an argumentative essay when they could visualize, on paper, two people having an argument. By allowing this type of organization, I was able to remove for them much of the angst of first-draft writing. When I allowed these students to draft arguments as confrontations between two visually represented characters, the structure and logic of their papers improved. And, because they developed a voice for pro and con, they were more likely to see holes in their arguments.

Kinesthetic. Students favoring this modality tend to be fidgeters. They may have been in trouble throughout their academic careers for wiggling, tapping their desks, clicking their pens, and all those other kinesthetic behaviors that annoy teachers. They are usually the first volunteers for erasing the board, going to the office, demonstrating a concept, or any other activity that gets them up out of their seats. These students are often highly coordinated, may have neat handwriting, and may well be athletes.

But kinesthetic learners have trouble staying put and do not learn well sitting still. They want to perform the play. They want to express the poetry. They do not want to be lectured. They crave any hands-on activities we can give them. In general, they are most productive when actively engaged. When I have students who seem unmotivated by the traditional
curriculum, who are becoming increasingly disruptive, I try to find kinesthetic work with them to do. I recall, during this period, working with a student dancer who was diagnosed as having a behavior disorder. She always began her thinking about writing with dancing. At the alternative school, I had a fairly large classroom and had reserved part of it as a “movement area” for the students who needed it. Many of my students used this area to relax and do yoga when they were too stressed out by an assignment; then they would return to their seats to finish.

In this classroom area, this dancer would put on her headphones and move around, thinking through the topic she had picked. For her persuasive paper she settled on the position that the desegregation of schools was failing and needed to be readdressed by the U.S. Supreme Court so that people could not flee from diversity. She asked her foster parent to help her find music from the civil rights era and, while thinking about issues of racial equality, she listened to this music as well as the rap she liked so well. Moving helped her develop her thoughts. During our research time, she was able to find, in the school library and in the journals and newspapers I kept in our classroom, current articles addressing the issue of ongoing segregation. Using butcher paper, she created a dance map along the floor—a kind of dance notation—of her emerging ideas and her support for them.

Along with the notations of the movements, she wrote statements documenting the progress—or lack of progress—in the struggle for desegregation. She drew on statistics from many school districts that indicated the schools were still highly segregated. She included anecdotes from people who had grown up in segregated schools. She quoted Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and other civil rights leaders. And throughout the patterns of these statements and numbers, she had her drawings of the dance. Her efforts were not perfect the first time, and she had to do much erasing and recopying, but she was much happier working this way and having dancing breaks between the writing on the paper.

Once this rough draft/outline was finished, she had her topic sentences for each paragraph with the support documents organized and only had to write them on paper. For her portfolio, she made a video of her “Dance of the Civil Rights Movement” in which she interpreted the movement’s stages up through her own budding awareness of it. The memory of the power of this dance still brings tears to my eyes.

Kinesthetic learners frequently have the most difficult time in traditional classrooms. The need for movement in their learning is problematic for those who want students still in their seats. However, if allowed to use their kinesis for good rather than mischief, these learners can be some of the most creative and dynamic students. My kinesthetic students created role plays, pantomimes, dances, and puppet plays involving characters as diverse as politicians, parents, and plants that came to life, all arguing about pollution control, abortion, and many other topics.

Existential. When Gardner first identified the existential intelligence, I became very excited. I knew that kid. All English teachers know that kid. Students favoring this modality tend to be the ones who must put everything in a larger framework, a global perspective, a historical context. The downside for these learners is that they may have trouble reducing topics to a manageable form. Because they ask the “why?” questions, they may be so focused on the big picture that they often miss necessary details.

In general, those with existential intelligence are most comfortable and productive when they are discussing or writing about themes. When social studies and literature are taught in thematic or historical units, they have a much easier time understanding the writings. When my teaching partner and I taught the British and Harlem Renaissances together, my existential students were in heaven. They easily saw the economic, political, and social patterns that must be in place for an artistic explosion. They also had the easiest time seeing the connections between the literary and artistic themes in the two eras.

A student with existential talent can pull together diverse materials to make his persuasive point. One student, concerned with what he saw as a blemished human rights record in our country, traced a course through American history that touched on the Dred Scott decision, a
Inclusion and the Multiple Intelligences

A series of stories on lynchings during Reconstruction, the Japanese internment camps, and the story of his father's draft into Vietnam. His research evolved from a desire to make an argument to local policymakers and school board members and grew into a research paper by the end of the year.

**Interpersonal.** The personal intelligences, interpersonal and intrapersonal, operate alongside the other intelligences. Just like introverts and extroverts, all students tend to be one or the other. Students favoring the interpersonal modality enjoy cooperative learning. They want to talk during discussions. But they have trouble with independent activities. They resist silent times in class and want to work in groups, even when not appropriate. These students may have a harder time on standardized assessments because of their need to discuss things prior to forming conclusions. Whatever their dominant intelligence, they are the most comfortable and productive when they are able to generate ideas in a group or with a partner.

One of my students, primarily an interpersonal/musical learner, had a learning disability that made it difficult for her to maintain paragraph structure throughout a paper. Paired with another student, she had a chance to develop her ideas auditorily, organizing her debate cards and translating them into a well-ordered persuasive essay. As she talked with her partner about their topic, divorce, the partner would take notes. This oral presentation pushed her to concentrate on the internal structure of each paragraph, making transitions and building to a conclusion.

**Intrapersonal.** Students favoring the intrapersonal modality often daydream. They have trouble with group projects and class discussions. They are very aware of their internal life and believe they have little need of others' opinions in order to carry on their work. They are comfortable working alone and often surprise teachers with their insights. It took me a while as a teacher to realize that some students just don't want to talk in class, yet they are still participating.

In general, students with an intrapersonal orientation are most comfortable and productive when journaling, creating mind maps, using personality inventories for character analysis, and developing their own individual college essays or multigenre papers.

I encourage my intrapersonal learners to develop an outline for a persuasive essay by drawing a mind map of two sides of their debate. This strategy allows them to focus on their own emotions, yet pushes them to explore the other side of the issue as well. As they learn to empathize with an advocate for the other side, they strengthen their own argument. Intrapersonal learners are generally willing to face the other side's position, if they see it as a way to inform their own ideas, rather than threaten the efficacy of those ideas. I've found that this kind of self-created dialogue helps students who might otherwise spend time staring at a blank piece of paper.

**A Multiple-Intelligences Approach to Behavioral Issues**

Of course, the expectations for the writing of each student will differ. For some, the persuasive essay will focus more on one well-constructed paragraph than on an entire essay. If those students are able to take the contents of their role play or other activity and construct a thesis statement, three or more support statements, and a conclusion statement that satisfy the teacher and themselves, they are progressing.

Students, who do not learn in the traditional way, who do not go through the "normal" developmental phases, or who come to us from troubled home environments are not "bad" or "stupid." To do as well as their nondisabled peers, they must work at least twice as hard, so it is in everyone's best interest to meet them more than halfway. Having a multi-intelligence classroom is a compelling way to bring out the best in all of our students, and allow them a safe place to develop.

**References**


**Other Books for Those Interested in This Subject**


Jennifer A. Borek is an assistant professor of secondary language arts education at the University of Memphis. Her primary research areas are accommodations for students with disabilities in the secondary English classroom and the use of the fine arts in the English curriculum.

**Editors' note:**

See a longer version of Jennifer Borek's article, including a chart depicting her scheme for identifying behaviors and learning strategies for each intelligence, on the National Writing Project website, at http://www.writingproject.org/Publications/quarterly. (See The Quarterly, Volume 25, Number 4.)