

Session 303

Open to Interpretation: Multiple Intelligences Theory in Adult Literacy Education by Silja Kallenbach, World Education/NCSALL

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory support instruction and assessment in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)?

METHOD- OLOGY (sample, methods, type of data)

The AMI Study aimed to engage adult literacy educators to consider MI theory and develop MI-based practices for their own contexts, with active support and guidance from the two co-directors of the study. The study design incorporated two interwoven, naturalistic, qualitative research projects focused on applying MI theory in practice. The first involved 10 studies that teachers conducted and the AMI co-directors facilitated. The second was a study across those 10 contexts, conducted by the co-directors for the purpose of understanding how MI theory could be used to good effect in adult literacy education. The co-directors, who served as the principal researchers, addressed this question by analyzing the combined experiences of the AMI teachers, how they interpreted and applied MI theory, and factors that influenced their decisions. The cross-site study tapped into data from the teachers' research studies and included additional data collection methods, mainly on-site audio and video observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of email and other communication. These methods generated rich descriptive data about teaching and learning and about the complex nature of classroom realities.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the AMI data yielded two broad categories of teachers' interpretation, *MI-Inspired Instruction and MI Reflections*. MI-Inspired Instruction focused on classroom practices and materials, whereas the MI Reflections focused on using MI to engage students in reflecting about their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, and preferences.

MI-Inspired Instruction

We identified three different forms of MI-inspired instruction that the AMI teachers designed and implemented: (1) Entry/Exit points; (2) Projects; and (3) Bridging. Entry and Exit Points refer to activities through which students demonstrate new knowledge or skill in a particular subject area or content. Providing a greater variety of entry points or ways to engage in a topic or skill area is perhaps the most common MI-informed practice, resulting from the most generative of MI's tenets that there is a plurality of intelligences. Projects refer to lessons or curriculum units that emphasize authentic problems and activities tapping students' intelligences as they are in life outside the classroom. Projects emphasize the "real problems and products" highlighted in MI theory's definition of intelligence. Bridging refers to linking one or more students' strengths to areas in which they are having difficulty, and draws on the tenet that each person has a unique profile of intelligences and consequently particular areas of strength.

Based on their particular goals and understanding of MI theory, the AMI teachers implemented one or more of these forms of MI-based instruction. The resulting findings were that these MI-inspired teaching approaches helped to

- reduce teacher directedness and increase student control and initiative
- increase the authenticity of the learning experiences
- make learning meaningful or relevant to students

Having learning choices made students more confident about taking greater control of their own learning, and it pushed teachers to allow that to happen. Choice-based activities were instrumental in increasing the relevance and meaning of lessons and in reducing teacher directedness. Among the MI-inspired instructional practices, projects resulted in the highest levels of authentic instruction. Of all the lessons the AMI teachers documented, those most favored by students and noted by teachers for high student engagement had content reflecting student interests and realities.

MI Reflections

MI Reflections is the term we coined to refer to approaches and activities through which students learned about MI theory and that used MI theory explicitly. Our analysis yielded three forms of MI Reflections the AMI teachers adopted: Learning About MI, Learning About Ourselves, and Learning About How We Learn. The corresponding findings were:

- Teaching about MI theory (Learning About MI) helped students embrace non-traditional learning activities.
- Using MI theory for self-reflection (Learning About Ourselves) enhanced students' perceptions of their abilities and career aspirations.
- MI Reflections are useful for identifying learning strategies (Learning About How We Learn).

The AMI Study affirmed the value of student reflection in building self-confidence and learning-to-learn skills. Nine of the 10 teachers implemented some form of MI Reflections, such as introducing the theory, uncovering and celebrating students' strengths, exploring careers, or identifying effective learning strategies with students. Six teachers ultimately positioned MI Reflections as a significant part of their teaching practice.

**IMPLICA-
TIONS FOR:**

PRACTICE

There is now a foundation of MI practice in adult literacy education that practitioners can examine and apply. Teachers need an understanding of MI theory as well as the access and willingness to implement diverse learning activities. In order for teachers to engage in and sustain MI-based practices, programs need to provide institutional support by ensuring that teachers have adequate paid preparation time, access to staff development, access to a variety of supplies, and as much flexibility as possible, to change the physical learning environment so it is conducive to different types of activities and groupings.

POLICY

Provide access to professional development and pay teachers to attend. To reflect MI theory, a policy and accountability system would move beyond current federal criteria. A relatively narrow range of predetermined, high-stakes outcome goals articulated by the National Reporting System engenders curricula packed with skills and content to be covered. These demands on limited instructional time bump up against the goal of developing students' metacognitive skills, such as reflecting on one's intelligence strengths and learning preferences.

**FURTHER
RESEARCH**

Additional research related to learning gains and other MI-based practice outcomes is needed. The impact of specific MI-based interventions, how MI-inspired practices improve students' self-efficacy, and teacher change merit further study.

**IMPOR-
TANCE OF
THIS STUDY**

The AMI Study highlights the value of including choices in the curriculum for how students process new information and demonstrate understanding. It also draws attention to the importance of identifying and drawing on students' strengths and interests and helping them reflect on the same. AMI activities promise, at a minimum, to engage and motivate students leading to increased attendance and retention. At best, they contribute to more efficient learning. The study provides practitioners concrete ideas for how to implement MI-based instruction and reflection activities.

**FOR MORE
INFOR-
MATION...**

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