

'Multiple Intelligences' at 25

Inside Higher Ed

March 25

The push toward group assignments. The rise of portfolios to document student progress. The backlash against the SAT and standardized testing, and the push to consider new ways that colleges might judge students' creativity and knowledge. The idea that IQ isn't destiny.

These and many other trends are intellectual offspring of the "multiple intelligences" movement that Howard Gardner launched 25 years ago with the publication of [*Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*](#). Gardner, professor of cognition and education at Harvard University, gave a talk Monday at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association to mark the anniversary.

Gardner and others noted that for all of the influence he has had, there are plenty of people who disagree, and who believe in standardized tests in ways that Gardner finds both offensive and irrelevant. But at the gathering Monday, in New York City, the overflowing crowd was entirely supportive of Gardner's work, with people calling him their hero.

"Multiple intelligences" is the view that there is not a single measure of intelligence (like the traditional IQ), but rather a range of intelligences present in different ways in everyone. Gardner also challenged the notion that intelligence is largely inherited. While he does not discount the role of genetics and parenting in intelligences, Gardner focuses as much on the nurture part of parenting as nature and also holds that people can work to improve their intelligences. (Detailed explanations of his work can be found [on Gardner's Web site](#).)

In his talk, Gardner sought to debunk some of the myths that he said have arisen about his theories and their creation. He said, for example, that his critics have charged repeatedly that he was looking for a way to challenge IQ tests. While Gardner freely acknowledges that he criticized IQ tests after his book came out, he said he didn't go looking for this battle. "I accepted the notion of intelligence," he said. Two other research efforts led him to his theory, he said. One was a study of artistically gifted children. The other was a study of people who have suffered brain injuries. Both of those experiences got him thinking about the different ways people have intelligence.

Gardner also said his book received a lift because of his title, although he said he can't remember when or how he made the "fateful decision" to refer to "intelligences" (in the plural). "I could have used 'talents' or 'competencies,'" he said. It was "intelligences" that grabbed people's attention, and that angered the testing establishment. "The psychometric

community had believed that it owned intelligence" so by "pluralizing it," Gardner said, "I caused a commotion."

At the time he published his book, he had [seven intelligences](#): musical, kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, spatial, linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. He has since added an eighth, naturalist, and he is mulling a ninth. While there are rumors that he is thinking of adding a spiritual intelligence, Gardner has been calling it "existential" intelligence, which will focus on skills related to asking the "big questions." Gardner stressed that an intelligence is defined both by the skills and the way they are learned and used, not just an individual interest or passion. He also stressed that he does not view intelligences as necessary good, and that he disagrees with those who — in a twist to his work — talk about "emotional intelligence" as if it is only a good thing. Gardner said it can be used for good or evil.

Looking ahead, Gardner sees considerable interest in his work, and expects it to lead in new directions. Among topics that interest him right now are how intelligences change with aging. His theory is that there are changes, but that intelligences do not disappear.

Gardner said that the fields of neurology and genetics have seen huge advances in scholarship since he wrote the book. He said that he largely believes that these findings have confirmed his views in that they have shown that many things are determined by multiple genes interacting in multiple ways, and the way the individual is raised and acts. But he said that as more advances take place, it will be time to review all of them and their relationship to his theories.

Abroad, he said he has been struck by growing interest in "multiple intelligences." In Denmark, the [Danfoss Universe](#) is an entire theme park — built without his playing any role — in which participants go through different exercises designed to expose them to different intelligences.

In terms of education, Gardner said he saw influence all over the place, from a few schools that have formally embraced his ideals to many teachers and professors who are inspired to change their modes of instruction. (Based on his own work, Gardner said, his courses no longer feature lectures.)

While he applauded the way many groups have criticized colleges that rely too much on the SAT, Gardner said he wasn't encouraging the development of a "multiple intelligence" based replacement. Gardner said that the problem isn't just the SAT, but the belief that measurement of that sort is valuable. "I don't believe one should go around and assess people's intelligences," he said. The only reason he said that he finds compelling to measure intelligence is to help someone who is having difficulty learning by identifying his or her problems.

As for the SAT, he said it might be useful — because of the way it is set up — in identifying people who have the skills to become law professors, but not much else.

In fact, Gardner said that one of his criticisms of the AERA is that so many researchers are on the quest for "the perfect test," without thinking that they might be on "a fool's errand." Although Gardner could no doubt benefit from developing a test of educational ideas following his ideas, he said he would not do so. He said that it was antithetical to his ideas to have a "seal of approval" from him, so he is content to watch many efforts based on his ideas, even if some go in directions he might suggest.

Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at Stanford University, called Gardner her "personal hero," said that it's easy from today's vantage point to underestimate the influence of his book. Many teachers have of course for years felt that there was not a single "entry point" for student learning, and they had talked about ideas that are consistent with Gardner's theories. But Darling Hammond said that he "validated" these views and gave them a research framework.

In terms of his "big conceptual breakthroughs," she said that the idea that "intelligence is not fixed and not a single measure" has changed the way most teachers are trained. Likewise, the idea that education isn't about memorizing information to spit it back at the teacher, but is about "problems solving and performing tasks" is largely accepted today because of Gardner's work.

As to standardized testing, she said that among the many contributions Gardner made was to challenge the assumption that test producers know what society needs. "We don't want a nation of law professors," she said.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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