Master Teacher or Teaching Master: Recovering the Master-Apprentice

Model in Religious and Theological Education

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Abstract

In recent years much emphasis has been focused on pedagogic approaches to the teaching of religion in the academe. While most studies seek to adapt pedagogic techniques from similar disciplines, few have focused on relational pedagogies. In the most recent edition of his book *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*, Howard Gardner suggests that to enable intelligence in students one's teaching and assessment should be contextualized. The vehicle Gardner sees that best accomplishes this goal is found in the master apprentice model. This paper will briefly survey the current setting of teaching religious studies, its goals, methods used to produce religious intelligence in students, and the areas of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills particular to religious studies. Then the author will offer an example for implementing an "apprentice pedagogy" within current religious studies scenarios to engage and enable students to gain mastery in the subject.

Body

The field of religious/theological education has a broad constituency and crosses over from the church to the academe. While many of our colleagues at this conference primarily focus on the training of students whose goal is to lead the religious/catechistic teaching/learning in their local churches, the focus of this paper will pertain to the role of those called to teach religion/theology in the college, university, and/or graduate school classrooms. This is not to say that those teaching in the church, or those teaching how to teach in the church, will not benefit from this discussion, but the aim of the author is to challenge the historical pedagogies used in

religious/theological educational settings and offer insight and hope for change that will benefit our students and, subsequently, those our students will minister to in the future.

While there are exceptions with every generalization, and growth has been occurring in our religious/theological schools, the majority of teaching is still based on a paradigm that focuses on the knowledge of the instructor being disseminated to the students. Parker Palmer calls this type of learning a "spectators sport." "The spectator-student" he writes "is often sitting in the far reaches of the upper grandstand, two or three times removed from what is happening on the field." He further deduces:

> It is no wonder that educated people . . . think of themselves as distant from the world, uninvolved in its career. From our platform we observe and analyze and assess, but we do not go into the arena—for that is how we have been taught to know. This means that virtues like compassion, the capacity to "feel with" another, are "educated away." In their place arises clinical detachment. (Palmer, 34).

Sam Wineburg who interviewed history teachers and their students about the task of "doing" history illustrates an example of this paradigm. In his article "Teaching the Mind Good Habits," Wineburg explains, "familiar mental habits, often overlooked or omitted when we describe our thinking processes to others, can create a gulf between us and our students" (Wineburg, np). To test his theory he gave the historians he interviewed an original document to read and as he observed them he noted that nearly all the historians approached the primary sources the same way. When asked to discuss how the process of their approach the response stated succinctly but one scholar was "Why would I mention that? Everyone does it [this way]." But when Wineburg interviewed the students majoring in history he found that "none of the undergraduates had yet acquired the habit of mind that [the faculty] found unremarkable" (ibid). The interpretation of his research led him to conclude:

> Students see their professors' thought as finished products, tidied up and packaged for public presentation in books, articles, and lectures. Historians shield from view their raw thinking.
>
> We need to bring this messier form of expertise into the classroom. Students . . . may never learn to think like historians, may never be able to reconstruct past worlds from the most minimal of clues. We need to show students that the self-assured figure lecturing from the podium is not what a historian looks like in his or her office, puzzling through difficult texts. (ibid)

It is this type of teaching I hope to encourage us to think about today. What will it require of us as educators? It will require that we learn more about the students we teach.

While many of us are familiar with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, our colleagues teaching religious/theological studies are not. Barry K. Gaeddert reminds us that in spite of new emphases on teaching, "few [instructors in traditional educational settings], if any, know how student learning occurs" (Gaeddert, 48). This is not a new revelation to those teaching religion/theology in colleges, universities, and seminaries. In their book, *The Chicago Handbook for Teachers*, Alan Brinkley and his associates admit:

> Most beginning college instructors—graduate students having their first experiences as teaching assistants, new Ph.D.'s starting their first teaching jobs—receive little or no training in how to deal with the classroom before they entered it. Primary and secondary school teachers ordinarily receive teacher training in education schools or departments. College and university teachers, by contrast, are usually trained intensively in their disciplines, . . . but seldom in the craft of teaching itself. . . . [M]any, perhaps most, new college teachers design their courses and enter their classrooms for the first time without very much guidance from anyone. (Brinkley, *et. Alt.*, vii-viii)

It is the opinion of this author that the most effective vehicle for faculty to discover the learning abilities of their students is through Gardner's theory. Most religious/theological institutions are what Gardner refers to as uniform schools, one that has a "one-dimensional view of how to assess people's minds." He further describes these schools as . . .

> featur[ing] a core curriculum—a set of facts that everyone should know—and very few electives. The better students, perhaps those with higher IQs, are allowed to take courses that call on critical reading, calculation, and thinking skills. . . . [T]here are regular assessments, using paper and pencil instruments, of the IQ or SAT variety. These

assessments yield reliable rankings of people; the best and the brightest get into the better colleges, and perhaps—but only perhaps—they will also get better rankings in life. There is no question that this approach works well for certain people. . . . Since this measurement and selection system is clearly meritocratic in certain respects, it has something to recommend.

The uniform school sounds fair. . . . But to the extent that your mind works differently . . . school is certainly not fair to you. (Gardner, 4-5)

For Gardner, one should not view the mind and its ability to receive and retain knowledge/information as being universal, but rather as an organ that accomplishes these tasks pluralistically. A view that recognizes many different and discrete facets of cognition, acknowledging that people have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles (ibid., 5). Before spending a few moments reviewing/rehearsing these intelligences, three points need clarification. First is Gardner's definition of "intelligence." He sees his understanding different from the classic psychometric view of intelligence; "the ability to answer items on tests of intelligence" (ibid., 6).

The essence of Gardner's understanding of intelligence is that it is "a computational capacity—a capacity to process a certain kind of information—that originates in human biology and human psychology" and "entails the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular cultural setting or community" (ibid.). Second, as one thinks about the intelligences one should remember that Gardner is not, necessarily, advocating the intelligence as a teaching tool but rather as a way certain individuals learn. It is easy to equate the use of music, for example, in a lesson if one is teaching toward those with musical intelligence. But this is only a part of Gardner's overall intent for the educator. It is important that educators know how best their students learn, but it is more valuable for the instructor to use that knowledge to help the student use their stronger intelligences more effectively and to strengthen weaker intelligences for future lessons that may not be taught to their strengths.

Finally, it is not the intent of this paper to give examples of how the intelligences can be implemented in the religious/theological classroom. While there are many viable applications for the intelligences in the classroom,[1] the goal here is to point up/identify the intelligences with a view to faculty using them to better understand their students in a mentor-apprentice environment.

The first of Gardner's seven, original intelligences is musical intelligence. Like all the intelligences, Gardner sees the individual with musical intelligence as "biologically prepared." Since the perception and production of music can be located primarily in the right hemisphere of the brain and that some loss of musical ability can occur as a result of certain brain traumas, Gardner thinks music is a viable vehicle humans use to retain information. Gardner sees cultural and developmental uses of music as evidence of its viability as an intelligence, as well as "musical notation provid[ing] an accessible and versatile symbol system" (Gardner, 9). Thus, there are some students who process and retain information through an inherent, cognitive, musical ability.

The second intelligence Gardner identifies as body-kinesthetic intelligence. Again, he sees this as a cognitive development in the motor cortex, "with each hemisphere dominant or controlling bodily movements on the contralateral side." He further states, "The evolution of specialized body movements is of obvious advantage to a species, and in human beings this adaptation is extended through the use of tools. Body movement undergoes a clearly defined developmental schedule in children; there is little question of its universality across cultures."

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[1] E.g.: Nigel Fancourt, "Challenges for Self-Assessment in Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 27:2 (2005), 115-125; Tom Hoerr, "How MI Informs Teaching at New City School," *Teachers College Record* 106:1 (2004), 40-48; David Martin, "Finding the *Missing* Students in Theological Education," *International Congregational Journal* 6:1 (2006), 65-82; Jennifer L. Nolen, "Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom," *Education* 124:1 (2003), 115-119; Thresa O'Donovan, "Doing it Differently: Unleashing Student Creativity," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 6:3 (2003), 159-163.

Gardner clearly sees a relationship to solving problems with physical activities; conveying ideas and thoughts through dance or calculating the speed, height, and position of a pitched ball in order to hit it just to name two (ibid., 10). While some have traditionally called this "hands on experience," there seems to be more to body-kinesthetic intelligence. One body becomes the device that primarily gains data.

The third intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, will be most familiar to religious/theological teachers because of the traditional nature of their discipline. While at first blush it might seem unnecessary to explain this intelligence, Gardner points up interesting insights. First is the nonverbal aspect of logical-mathematical intelligence, where "a solution to a problem can be constructed before it is articulated." A second aspect is the rapidness associated with this intelligence in the gifted individual. Another important point for Gardner is the irony in the fact that "the actual mechanism by which one arrives at a solution to a logical-mathematical problem" –the brain—"is not yet completely understood" (ibid., 12). The implications of these aspects will be explored later, but it is important to understand the inconsistent nature of the intelligence.

Closely related to the previous intelligence for most religious/theological instructors is Gardner's next intelligence; linguistic intelligence. But, for Gardner, there is a quantitative difference. Through the universal development of language in children across cultures and in the development of language among deaf children, Gardner sees linguistic intelligence operating "independently of a specific input modality or output channel" (ibid., 13). While we tend to think of those with linguistic intelligence in religious/theological programs as those with the ability to speak or write well, one should not forget the student immersed in the hip-hop culture might be attracted to this genre because of an inherent linguistic ability.

The fifth intelligence is spatial intelligence. Here, Gardner equates this intelligence with navigational abilities and map reading as well as understanding the angles in shooting pool and the knowing where an opponent's pieces are on a chess board. As with the other intelligences, there is a cognitive and psychological foundation to spatial intelligence (ibid., 14). For the students in religious/theological classrooms, some will have the ability to understand concepts, such as the geographical distances traveled by Jesus or Mohammad, and ideas through spatial thinking.

The final two intelligences of Gardner's original seven are, on one level, inseparably linked and, on another level, quite separate. The first is interpersonal intelligence; Gardner sees this as the "core capacity to notice distinctions among others—in particular, contacts in their moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions." He further explains that this intelligence is not, like previous intelligences, dependent upon language to be understood/interpreted. It, too, has been associated with activities in specific areas of the brain, and has biological and psychological foundations (ibid., 15-16). The implications for teachers are vast and valuable, but for now the instructor of religious/theological subjects should remember that they are expressing more content to their students than just written and spoken words.

The second of the final intelligences is intrapersonal intelligence. Gardner understands this to be the ability to "access . . . one's own feeling life, one's range of emotions, the capacity to make discriminations among these emotions and eventually to label them and to draw on them as a means of understanding and guiding one's own behavior." Here, too, Gardner lists cognitive and psychological evidence for this intelligence, and he thinks "the capacity to transcend the satisfaction of instinctual drives" is possible evidence for a biological/evolutionary foundation (ibid., 17). For the instructor of religious/theological studies, however, it should be remembered

that there is more to their students than names on papers and faces in seats, these are multifaceted individuals who bring a knowledge of themselves that only they can understand.

Since the introduction of his Multiple Intelligences Theory, Gardner has conceded the existence of two additional intelligences; naturalist intelligence and spiritual/existential intelligence. Naturalist intelligence, as Gardner defines it, "is the core capacity to recognize instances as members of a species" where "survival often depend[s] on recognizing conspecifics and on avoiding predators." For a socio- and psychological aspect, he views the use and importance of this intelligence in developed society to be all but gone, but he does suggest, "our entire consumer culture is based on the naturalist intelligence" (ibid., 19). As for spiritual/existential intelligence, Gardner is quick to confess that he does not "believe that an intelligence should be confounded with an individual's phenomenological experience," and that "spirituality is indissociable from a belief in religion and God generally, or even from allegiance to a particular faith or sect." But he is willing to except this as an "intelligence of big questions," which he describes as "based on the human proclivity to ponder the most fundamental questions of existence" (ibid, 20). As with the other intelligence, the religion/theology teacher should understand their students' capacity to receive and process information through natural and spiritual abilities.

As I stated earlier, the point of rehearsing Gardner's intelligences is not to inspire teachers to invent techniques to use in the classroom (while that will, inevitably, be a byproduct), rather it is to enlighten religious/theological educators as to how their students learn. To encourage a focus on students' abilities rather than forcing students to adapt to a system of learning devoid of new information. In a recent article on brain research and learning, Carol Wehrheim points up three things current research has revealed about how the brain learns: first,

it attaches new information to already existing information; second, it must use new information

in a way that moves it into long-term memory; and third, it needs time to process the new

information (Wehrheim, 9). Understanding that students' brains accomplish these three tasks

through the auspices of a variety of intelligences leads Gardner to conclude that there were three

implications of this theory for education.

First Gardner thinks that educational institutions should be more individual centered. This

type of institution, he explains, "takes the differences among individuals very seriously.

Educators attempt to learn as much as they can about the learning strengths and proclivities of

each student" (*Multiple Intelligences*, 56). In most religious/theological institutions the focus is

placed on the students' ability to adhere to a certain doctrinal or denominational perspective, an

ideological research method, or a social or cultural belief. In other words, the discipline is what

is most important not those studying and/or learning the discipline. One area where this has been

tested is in the arena of language acquisition. Marjorie Hall Haley conducted research on the

effects of the application of multiple intelligence theory on students learning a second language.

The experimental groups' lessons were "generally more learner-centered and included a wide

variety of instructional activities" that included "thematic and content-based lessons" that

focused on the various intelligences (Haley, 168). Her data yielded results where students in the

experimental groups "outperformed those in the control groups" and "expressed positive feelings

about teachers using a variety of instructional strategies as well as assessment practices that

addressed the multiple intelligences" (ibid., 171). As one invests time in discovering how their

students learn best, the reward will be increased knowledge and confidence.

The second focus Gardner sees educational institutions need to utilize/employ his theory

is the priority of educational goals. He admits, "MI theory is certainly relevant to education, but

it is not in itself an educational rationale or goal" and schools need to articulate "realistic and attainable" goals (*Multiple Intelligences*, 58-59). At first blush many of our religious/theological institutions accomplish this task. There are clear understandings of what is being taught; religious doctrine, religious practices, research methodologies, cultural and social phenomena, etc. But where we fall short is in addressing student success in Gardner's terms. He thinks educators should approach assessing students' achievement by saying, "My educational goal is X. I will know that I have achieved it when my students can do Y. And here is how I propose to use the concepts/theory/hypothesis/claim of multiple intelligences to help achieve that goal" (ibid., 59). Many of us know what to teach and what students should know, but it is in the doing where Gardner's suggestion assesses students' knowledge. This requires the inclusion of skill in addition to knowledge. For Francois Sigaut knowledge and skill do not differ by content. He writes, "An expert car driver may not necessarily 'know' much more or much else than a well-taught beginner. The difference, acquired by training, is that he 'knows' and uses this knowledge otherwise" (Sigaut, np). Here much more time is needed between teacher and student to ensure that knowledge has developed into skill.

The final task Gardner thinks educators need to utilize his theory is multiple representations of key concepts. He argues, "disciplinary understanding is most likely to be realized if educators focus on a manageable number of key concepts and explore them in some depth" with the result that students "gain an invaluable asset—significant exposure to the ways in which experts in that discipline think" (*Multiple Intelligences*, 59). Here, Wineburg's comments mentioned earlier ring true—students are not exposed to the scholar at work only the results of the scholar's findings. For many in religious/theological institutions this is understood in ministry practicums and internships, but what about the student preparing for a life in a non-

ministerial vocation? How does the scholar demonstrate the task of scholarship to his or her

students? Peter Brooks suggests, "We should think about taking fewer students, keeping them

longer, supporting them better, mentoring them more fully, and giving them ample time to

develop." He compares the teaching-learning methods of traditional humanities graduate

programs with those in the field of the hard sciences:

> Graduate students in the sciences," he states, "are less alienated [from their teachers and task] . . . because they know they belong to a community of researchers. . . . A redefinition of graduate programs and curricula that would abolish the notion of 'course work' in favor of a variety of collaborative projects with faculty members might go some way toward restoring a sense of apprenticeship to the profession. If we could break away from our obsession with courses, grades, papers, and other measures of progress toward the degree, we might be able to redefine graduate education as a period of freer intellectual inquiry. The seminar . . . might return as something closer to the scientist's laboratory: a place where the search for truth was under way. (Brooks, np)

Here one finds and uses the inevitable byproduct of understanding Gardner's theory. The

teacher concerned with how students process and retain information will incorporate a variety of

techniques in their classes to ensure learning. The ideas are endless on how to use the knowledge

of intelligences in teaching. Barry Gaeddert encouraged the use of Classroom Assessment

Techniques (CATs) in classrooms at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

There he encouraged several professors to have their students take the last two to three minutes

of class to write down what the clearest idea/concept was during that class and what was the

most unclear idea/concept. After doing this for a six week period, the professors, who were

skeptical at first, "expressed surprise in how the [CATs] actually aided in teaching the material"

and saw how they could aide in being "better prepared for future teaching settings" (Gaeddert,

50). In teaching biblical languages, MaryKate Morse demonstrates how inter- and intrapersonal

intelligence assist in teaching. She writes, "Students do not function well under stress, but they

do work hard if they are motivated to learn something beneficial to their life and ministry. . . .

[A]t times students feel like they are the only ones struggling or that they are the only ones feeling behind. . . . I have started asking students about their level of anxiety" in order to build self-awareness and connect "students in a more natural and familial environment" (Morse, 48). Another example of using the knowledge of multiple intelligences in teaching is using tools to assess the intelligences of students. William McKenzie offers a Multiple Intelligences Survey for Older Students in his work *Multiple Intelligences and Instructional Technology*. He understands the survey as a "snapshot of how . . . students currently perceive their strengths in all nine intelligences" and is an opportunity for teachers "to appreciate the unique distribution of intelligences within each of your students, and across [the] classroom" (McKenzie, 16).

What is needed in our religious/theological classrooms are instructors/teachers who take the time to know the students they teach. Instructors/teachers who spend time researching the ways students learn as they do their topic. While it may be time consuming, the investment will pay off. Institutional foci may need to shift from publishing scholarly works to producing scholars. In the end, our attention should be toward those we teach and in so doing, we will, as Jennifer Nolan concludes, "realize the benefits such as active learners and successful students.

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