Appealing to Every Type of Learner

Incorporating the Theory of Multiple Intelligences in Religious Education Classrooms

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Every person—child or adult, wealthy or poor—learns differently and deserves a classroom experience that addresses his or her preferred learning style. However, implementing teaching methods that appeal to multiple ways of learning is not always an easy task. To make the greatest impact, teachers must know what those different learning styles are so they can better meet their students' needs.

Howard Gardner, a psychologist and professor of education at Harvard, developed the theory of multiple intelligences as a way to categorize how humans learn. His books *Frames of Mind* and the more recent *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* have changed the way many educators think about teaching. Gardner devised a list of eight intelligences that all humans possess but use to varying degrees:

- **Verbal–linguistic**
- **Visual–spatial**
- **Logical–mathematical**
- **Musical–rhythmic**
- **Bodily–kinesthetic**
- **Interpersonal**
- **Intrapersonal**
- **Naturalistic**

This can explain why some people prefer to work alone or in groups, express themselves through movement, learn using visual aids, or tend to think critically. Development of each intelligence is based on both genetics and environment. Individuals may be strong in more than one area. The following are Gardner's eight multiple intelligences as well as examples of how they can be applied in the religious education setting.

Verbal–Linguistic

People who easily learn languages and can write and speak well are associated with having a strong verbal–linguistic intelligence. Their ability to express themselves in this manner allows them to accomplish whatever goals are set before them. Careers associated with this category include, but are not limited to the law, writing and public speaking.

The use of this intelligence can be included in the religious education environment in a variety of fashions. For example, when teaching children various liturgical hymns, share the cultural spectrum of Orthodoxy by having translations of the hymns in multiple languages during instruction. Other feasible avenues to complement this intelligence include assigning children to read aloud from the Bible, having projects that involve class presentations and encouraging participation in the St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival (see the Department of Religious Education's website, religioused.goarch.org, for more information about the Oratorical Festival).

Visual–Spatial

People with a strong visual–spatial intelligence learn best through visualization or observation. They are better able to understand a concept if they can see it in front of them in some fashion, in either two or three dimensions. Observed items can include: icons, liturgical items, charts, maps, flyers and bulletin boards. Some individuals who fall into this category are sculptors, illustrators, designers and surgeons, as they all tend to work well with both their eyes and their hands. The second part of this intelligence focuses on individuals who prefer to organize items spatially such as navigators, costume-makers and those who enjoy putting puzzles together.

In the classroom, incorporate art by displaying or making icons. Have a student pretend he or she is a tour guide in a city or country that is being focused on in a lesson. Allow children to pretend they are architects, and have them design an Orthodox Church to test their knowledge of traditional church layouts (e.g., narthex, nave, soleas, altar, Pantocrator and iconostasion). Other applications of this intelligence include allowing for photo-taking opportunities, illustrating a prayer, learning to make prayer ropes and making mixed-media collages. Relate the images in the collage to the focus of the lesson for the day.

Logical–Mathematical

Individuals who have developed the logical–mathematical intelligence, such as scientists and mathematicians, are able to handle long chains of reasoning. They are resourceful when it comes to problem-solving and logically analyzing situations. Although there are few opportunities to incorporate scientific and mathematical thinking into a religious curriculum, activating this intelligence is not impossible.

In the classroom, appeal to children who find strength in using this intelligence by presenting them with questions that will allow them to think critically, such as asking, "What would you do in the situation that Jesus was in?" It's also important to focus on developing a class routine that children can easily conform to. This method can appeal to a wide variety of age groups. For older classes, a basic class session may include a prayer, offering collection, religious instruction and follow-up activities. However, younger children may have other areas such as story time, snacks and music. However simple or complex the routine, make sure it best suits the age group being taught.

Musical–Rhythmic

Those who are strong in this intelligence, such as performers, musicians and composers, appreciate various forms of musical expression. They have the capacity to recognize and interpret different sounds and rhythm. Unfortunately, this intelligence tends to be pushed aside in many school classrooms because educators are at a loss about how to incorporate musical expression into their lessons. Fortunately for religious instruction, this does not have to be the case. In the Orthodox Church we are blessed with beautiful hymns. Incorporate singing or chanting these hymns into a lesson, or teach a unit on Church hymnology in which singing is a part of every class. Challenge the students to write their own songs or poems on a given topic of study. Since these suggestions may not be feasible for younger children, have religious music playing in the background during craft or snack time, sing a Bible song related to the lesson of the day, or make an effort to sing and learn a simple liturgical hymn.

Bodily–Kinesthetic

The bodily–kinesthetic intelligence entails the use of one's body or parts of the body to complete a task. Incorporation of this intelligence provides children of every age an avenue to release their energy after sitting for extended periods of time. This could be something as simple as reaching to the ceiling and bending down to the ground, or having transitions from one activity to another by having the class do movements such as skipping, galloping and hopping. To appeal to this intelligence during religious instruction, have the class make the sign of the cross, put the words of a prayer to dance, or act out the lesson for the day in a dramatic production.

Interpersonal

Individuals who possess a strong interpersonal intelligence are typically outgoing and comfortable with group interaction. They are tuned in to the emotions, desires and motivations of the people around them.

One of the easiest ways to incorporate this intelligence is by providing opportunities for peer interaction with partners or groups. Because not all children thrive when working with others, begin the year with an ice-breaker activity to establish a sense of community in the classroom. It's important for children to feel comfortable working with others.

Once a sense of community has been established, it's time to incorporate activities into the curriculum to enhance this intelligence. For example, when discussing the importance of icons, have one student (perhaps one who is also a visual–spatial learner) pretend he or she is an iconographer while another student plays an interviewer who is interested in learning more about iconography. Or, at the end of a unit, have a review game where students work in teams to answer trivia questions. If these are not feasible, allow time for small groups to meet and discuss questions that pertain to the lesson for the day.

Intrapersonal

People with detailed and accurate self-knowledge have been motivated to develop their intrapersonal intelligence. Understanding their personality, emotions, motivations, strengths and weaknesses tends to be prioritized. Working independently and being motivated to set personal goals are common traits of people with this intelligence. Although these individuals may seem to be on the reserved side, they are usually conscious of how to apply what they learn to their lives in order to further accurately develop self-awareness.

In the classroom, provide opportunities for reflection in an in-class journal assignment, or ask questions that allow for critical thinking and reflection both during and outside of classroom instruction. Allowing time for children to work independently on a given task would work here as well.

Naturalistic

Naturalistic intelligence is well-developed in those who show interest and appreciation for nature and the environment. Specific areas of interest or study may include botany and meteorology. More generally, individuals who are attracted to farming, gardening and studying the weather tend to have a more-developed naturalistic intelligence.

To appeal to this intelligence in the classroom, take a field trip outdoors to explore and interact with God's creation. If a field trip is not feasible, bring the outdoors inside. Use natural items such as sticks and leaves for crafts, or plant a window garden to witness the fruits of God's creation. When reviewing Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, reenact the story using real palms. Make Adam, Eve and the animals out of Play-Doh. While discussing the miracle of Jesus healing the blind man, provide real clay and reenact the story using a toy person.

Even the most experienced educator would find it difficult to appeal to every intelligence in a single lesson. However, an attempt should be made to incorporate each intelligence when appropriate throughout the year to give all students an opportunity to learn how they learn best. Incorporating this theory into the curriculum personalizes education and shows the children that they are the priority.

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RESOURCES

- H. Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New horizons* (Ebrary Reader)
- S. Seider, "An Educator's Journey toward Multiple Intelligences," Edutopia, www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-theory-teacher
- M. K. Smith, "Howard Gardner & Multiple Intelligences," The Encyclopedia of Informal Education, www.infed.org/thinkers/gardner