# Intrapersonal Intelligence Strategies in the Developmental Writing Classroom

By Mary Ellen Gleason

In 1983 Howard Gardner, a Harvard cognitive psychologist and author, shook the educational world, if not the psychometricians, with what he called multiple intelligences in his book *Frames of Mind*. The theory of multiple intelligences provides a point of view that is a variant to the traditional intelligence assessments utilized by school psychologists for nearly a hundred years. The intelligence assessment originated over a century ago when a headmaster at a French school asked a psychologist to develop a means for predicting those students who would be successful and those students who would not be successful in school. Alfred Binét developed a test in response to the headmaster's request (Armstrong, 2000). Today we call that test an intelligence test or the IQ test.

*"[S]tudent writing as a means to making sense of one's experience is inherently utilizing the intrapersonal intelligence."*

## A Composite View of Intelligence

Gardner's new theory outlined seven intelligences:

- linguistic intelligence
- musical intelligence
- logical-mathematical intelligence
- spatial intelligence
- bodily-kinesthetic intelligence
- intrapersonal intelligence
- interpersonal intelligence

While the number of intelligences have grown as Gardner has continued to explore the concept since 1983, the implications of a pluralistic view of

competencies of intelligences has also been explored by a variety of learning communities. Initially Gardner recognized seven intelligences in *Frames of Mind*. His later book Intelligence *Reframed, published in 1999, listed and explored other intelligences,* "including *n*aturalists, spiritual, existential, and moral ones" (4). For educators, multiple intelligences have "important educational implications" (2006, 6).

## Intrapersonal Intelligence in Higher Education

While many of these intelligences can be incorporated into the higher education classroom, intrapersonal intelligence poses some intriguing opportunities in the developmental writing classroom. According to Gardner, developing intrapersonal intelligence produces an emerging self. Gardner refers to intrapersonal intelligence as the "sense of self" (124), and as developing the "internal aspects of a person" (4-6). Gardner elaborates, "The core capacity at work here is access to one's own feeling life – one's range of affects or emotions: the capacity to label them to enmesh them in symbolic codes, to draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding one's behavior" (239). Thomas Armstrong in his book, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*, describes intrapersonal intelligence as "self-knowledge and the ability to act adaptively on the basis of the knowledge. This intelligence includes having a picture of oneself (one's strengths and limitations), awareness of inner moods, intentions, motivations, temperaments, and desires, and the capacity for self-discipline, self-understanding, and self-esteem" (p. 124).

## Personal Narrative or the "Haunted Essay"

If the emerging self is a result of intrapersonal intelligence, could strategies which utilize the intrapersonal intelligence in composition help produce an emerging writer? As an instructor of developmental writing, I stumbled upon the value of students developing their self-knowledge as an aid in learning to write more fluently and with confidence. During the first semester that I began teaching developmental writing, I prepared a writing prompt for a personal narrative. I drew my ideas for the personal narrative assignment from *Writing from personal experience* by Nancy Kelton. I asked my students to recall an experience that really got to them and still haunts them today. The writing prompt for what I have dubbed the "haunted essay" asks the students to consider a number of questions in order to write about an event that still haunts them. The questions are:

> Can you see pictures in your mind?
>
> Do you remember dialogue, even if it is just pieces of it or if you have to paraphrase it?

> What was said to you?
>
> What made you react so strongly?
>
> How did you feel?
>
> Write down some of the adjectives that come to mind. Then use behavior, action and dialogue, and details to demonstrate those adjectives.
>
> How did you respond to your emotions? Anger, loneliness, or embarrassment? If you were embarrassed did you try to cover it up, make a joke about it, stutter, talk fast, or blush? (Kelton, 1997)

I was not prepared for the essays that I received. One student whose family is from New York City wrote about two cousins who were killed in the Twin Towers on September 11. They were both firemen. One woman talked about coming home from school when she was a child and finding that her home was in flames. At first no one could tell her if her family was safe. She wrote about the horror and confusion and then the joy in finding that all of her family had escaped. As an adult reflecting on the loss of her home, she mourned the loss of family pictures. Another student described how, as a result of his parents' divorce, his mother came and took his brother. He described watching his mother's car pull away from the house with his little brother looking at him from the back window as she drove away. Frequently, my students talked about the loss of a loved one.

When my students wrote about what haunted them, they were the experts. They and only they knew the answers to the questions and could elaborate. They were motivated to make a point and support it with details. An introduction and conclusion had a special meaning to them when they wrote about what haunted them. They wanted to communicate effectively about that which they were experts, and in many cases, I believe writing about what haunted them was healing. Moreover, student writing as a means to making sense of one's experience is inherently utilizing the intrapersonal intelligence.

Recently, I was able to unpack the haunted essay in a new way. I spoke with each of my students about their personal narratives before I returned their essays to them. Frustrated by the students' lack of attention to the higher levels of composition that I included in my rubric for revision, I noted again and again that my students went through their essays and corrected grammar and mechanics without addressing some of the more important changes that I recommended in the rubric. Again, I was surprised. One student, who could not seem to stop talking in class, listened intently as I talked one on one

with her and suggested that she should make some of the noted changes, keep this essay beyond this semester, and come back to it sometime in the future. I told her that children of divorced parents would one day find their voices and be able to better address the issues that they had to face. Her essay was pervasively sad, but was a worthwhile essay because as a writer she opened up to show her sadness by explaining the disappointment she and her brothers experienced again and again without resolution, and her father who died without reconciliation with his children. Another student who needed to revise her essay had included some humorous comments about a snake she met one morning coming downstairs. She said in her essay that the snake had mistaken her staircase for a rainforest. I talked with her about her successful humorous voice in her writing. She worked at revising her essay, and I saw her humor surface again in other essays. I am glad she took the risk of using humor again and was aware of that element of her voice in writing.

## Reflective Journaling

I discovered that reflective journaling is another means of introducing intrapersonal intelligence into the developmental writing classroom to stir the emerging writer. Bringing reflective journaling into the developmental writing classroom has introduced me to three pedagogical issues with which to grapple—assignment approaches, instruction on reflective thinking, and evaluation of journals.

From Greek philosophers and Roman writers to St. Augustine, journaling has not only been practiced, but highly recommended throughout the centuries. Strangely, journaling fell from practice in the educational environment in the twentieth century. However, in more recent years, journaling has been utilized in a variety of disciplines, in a span of ages from elementary age to adult students. "Even though the various educational benefits of journal writing have been known for centuries and the process was popular a hundred years ago, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that journaling became widespread as a tool in the educational setting" (Palmer, Cozean, Olson-Dinges; 1999, pp. 71). Daily writing is recognized as a means of improving reading and writing for the language arts student. Furthermore, reflective self-dialogue helps the student find his or her voice and provides self-expression which is part of intrapersonal learning.

I do not argue the importance of journaling but finding the best means of engaging my developmental writing students in journaling has been a challenge. I tried various journaling assignments. All had limited success. Initially, I asked my students to keep a journal for at least three days a week in a spiral notebook. Each week I checked to be sure they made at least three entries a week. Finally, a few of my students sprouted some wings. I was very

surprised at one young man who worked at Wal-Mart and wrote personal poetry in his entries. I never dreamed that he had a poetic bent.

There are other journaling assignments that I have tried in my classroom. I had several of my classes keep a sensory journal for several days, cataloguing and keeping a written record of stimulations to their five senses during the day. Giving ten to twenty minutes during the class to write reflectively and storing this journal on a flashdrive is another approach that I have used. After a few weeks, I asked them to turn in a hard copy of all of their entries.

While journaling presents several assets, I discovered that it also engenders several liabilities. The assignment of writing about something that haunts my students intrigued them, but journaling initially seemed to fall flat. Again and again I would read, "Today I …." Events were sequential and not reflective. To challenge their thinking, I talked to them about the differences of a diary and a journal (Kemper, Sebranek, & Meyer, 2001). Both diaries and journals involve continuous daily entries. Both diaries and journals are a record of events. However, journals differ from diaries in that they encompass reflective thinking about events, people, and a variety of thoughts, questions, and perplexities. Journaling in the developmental writing classroom can introduce and promote reflective thinking and introduce the student to the freedom of expression necessary to encourage writing as an art.

The catch in journal writing for my developmental students appeared to be not the daily journal writing but the concept of reflective thinking. Spalding and Wilson claim that "reflection is a mysterious concept to many students…." Reflective thinking is an essential skill to the adult learner who strives to identify, analyze, and solve problems. Defining reflection, Spalding and Wilson quote John Dewey's *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process* as "the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends" (1394).

Further, I discovered that students may feel that they are journaling reflectively, and in actuality, they may not really be making the thought connections needed in reflective thinking. Why do the students perceive themselves as writing their journals in an elevated manner inconsistent with what they actually did write? One educator proposed the following:

> "…lack of preparation might explain why some of the journals are of poor quality…the students are used to writing in an academic context…[where] the students have been asked to copy, summarize and regurgitate for fourteen years…and then we want them to

> critically reflect, think and write in their journals…no wonder they look a little transfixed when I give them a journal assignment…" (O'Connell and Dyment, 2006, p. 690).

Because I discovered that my students tended to confuse personal narration with journal writing, it became apparent that instruction on reflective thinking and writing in order to journal would be a necessity. I would agree with Dewey, who said, "reflective habits of mind must be taught" (Dewey, 1933, p. 1395). Without instruction in reflective thinking, the developmental writing instructor can expect to see the students' journals begin, "Today I..." written repeatedly at the beginning of each entry and a flat sequential ordering of events. Quoting John Dewey, Spalding and Wilson define reflective thinking as the "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed… knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). Training is necessary for a higher level education student to produce the type of sustained critical thinking involved in journaling. (Spalding & Wilson, 2002).

Drawing from the research of Spalding and Wilson, I utilized four pedagogical strategies. These strategies helped my students to develop criteria in their reflective journaling:

1. Reflection in/on action

2. Personal reflection

3. Deliberative reflection

4. Critical reflection

Reflection in/on action would be reflective writing about events and performances bringing in detailed observations. Personal reflection would involve personal narration with interpretive thinking. Deliberative reflection observes and critically writes about competing points of views. Finally, critical reflection notes larger ramifications such as social, ethical, and political consequences and implications and even tries to be philosophical.

Applying this typology to my classroom, I developed a PowerPoint outlining the four criteria in reflective journaling elaborating with bulleted items and pictures to create an interactive class discussion about these points. Then I gave my class an essay entitled "In case you ever want to go home again" from High Tide in Tucson written by Barbara Kingsolver and recommended by Spalding and Wilson. As they read a passage in the essay, they were to annotate throughout the text marking an "A" for reflection on action or

events, "P" for personal reflection, "D" for deliberative reflection, and "C" for critical reflection. I then divided the class into knee groups allowing them to discuss and defend their choices with their peers. From this point on, I marked any reflective journaling that they turned into me with the same annotations. Grading was based on how well they developed the reflection on events and personal, deliberative, or critical discussions. All four criteria did not necessarily have to be used but reflection on one or more of those criteria was essential. This class activity served to make my students more aware of how to engage in reflective thinking and writing and helped to bring them to the "Ah-ha" in their reflective thinking and writing.

A final issue that I have faced in reflective journal writing is evaluation. Evaluating a student's journal can be problematic. Assessment can be difficult. Some faculty may question whether journals should be graded at all. If an instructor gives a uniform grade for simply completing the assignment, some students may feel cheated who have written more reflectively than others who have simply summarized or recorded events. Privacy can also be another issue for students who are writing a journal with freedom of thought. Assessment methods used to evaluate journals can include rubrics, pass/fail, or a subjective evaluation based on a given criteria. I have chosen the subjective evaluation. I read through their journals making comments and using the A, P, D, and C annotations on their journals. Most comments are positive and encourage more development on certain points. If a genuine effort was made, I give a 100%. If a minimal effort was made, I do not give the student a 100% but ask them to try again or give them a lower grade. I have found that my comments are the most important part of the evaluation. I realize that they are on a learning curve in reflective thinking and writing. For most of them, this writing is a very new form of writing, but frankly, they like it, and I do not want to discourage them from writing reflective journals. I want to encourage this type of writing, but use essays and chapter homework as the work that I grade more formally.

## Assessments Aiding Self-knowledge

Learning about learning has been another strategy I have used to incorporate intrapersonal intelligence to benefit my students in their work in my class and in their program – not to mention their lives. Adult students can grow in their self-knowledge by taking assessments or questionnaires that inform them of their learning strategies or their learning modalities.

A questionnaire called VARK provides students with an attitudinal assessment of their learning modality preferences. The VARK test is an acronym for visual, aural, reading/writing, and kinesthetic modalities of learning. Modalities of learning refer to the students' preferences in taking in and giving

out information. While this sixteen question assessment is an attitudinal test and not a diagnostic test, community college students seem to appreciate the information that this assessment provides them. I often ask my students, “Did this learning assessment surprise you?” With one exception, I have been told that the learning preferences that they have been shown to have seem true to their experiences.

Understanding and utilizing the VARK assessment to its full potential requires understanding multi-modal learning versus singular modal learning. Students who are multi-modal will need to receive information in a learning environment that touches on each of their preferred learning modalities. They will not reach the comprehension level adequately unless each of their learning preferences is utilized. Students with a singular modality preference are able to comprehend new information with the use of their single learning modality. However, if they are in a learning environment that is not predominately or only remotely using their modality, they will need to strategize carefully in managing their learning. For example, a student with a single aural learning modality who is learning a subject or task without lecture or discussion may need to find other aural means to strengthen their learning of that task or topic. Seeking out discussions with classmates or the instructor or perhaps even locating an audio book on the subject may be helpful. Knowing and using this information can help students manage their own learning by situating themselves to gain and give out information using their learning preferences. This management of learning can produce a higher level of learning. Conversely, the students who are not aware of their learning modality preferences can become frustrated in their learning environment if they are not utilizing an awareness and management of their best learning modes.

Accessing the VARK questionnaire is not difficult. Our college is currently using Susan Anker’s Real Writing for Developmental Writing courses. In Chapter 1, a copy of the VARK questionnaire is provided. The chapter further helps students to understand how knowledge of their learning preferences can help them in college. The VARK assessment can also be accessed by going to http://www.vark-learn.com/. At the VARK website the students can then print out a copy for themselves for future reference.

Once my students have taken the assessment, I sometimes ask them to write a classification essay or a compare and contrast essay on the different learning preferences that they have. Typically, if I ask them to write a compare and contrast essay, I request that they compare and contrast their strongest learning preference with their weakest learning preference. Again, because this is about them, they are the experts. They can use the website to reference for

their primary support and use their personal knowledge of their own learning to provide details and illustrations from their life to be the secondary support.

Other self-assessments that are metacognitive can help developmental students develop intrapersonal intelligence strategies. The LASSI is a learning strategies test that is not attitudinal. Rather it is a diagnostic assessment with standardized scores and national norms. It is a reliable test that also provides recommendations to strengthen weak areas. Multiple intelligence assessments are also available online.

Reading "The Nature of Adult Learning and Effective Training Guidelines" by Hewitt, I became very aware of the components of adult learning (Hewitt, 1995). The more I read about adult learning the more I wanted my students to be aware of the different learning qualities that adult students possess as they attempt to further their education. I feel it is very helpful to them to realize that if they have been out of school for a long time, or if they did not do well in school when they were in school, they now possess a different lens that works in their favor as a student of a community college and as a student in developmental writing. They are not in Kansas anymore.

To help crystallize the differences between pedagogical and andragogical learning, I prepared a PowerPoint on adult learning. I pictured each component as a slice of a pizza. Once we review the slide presentation and discuss the differences, I ask my students to write a compare and contrast essay on the differences that they note in their learning as a child and now as an adult. Personalizing their essays motivates them in their essay writing.

## Summary

The teaching of writing has undergone a major paradigm shift in the past forty years. Prior to this shift, English instructors assigned "themes" to their students and then graded the themes by noting grammar and mechanical errors. Teaching students to write today involves teaching the writing process and the recursive dynamics in composing. English teachers must be informed and creative in their instructional strategies. The theory of multiple intelligences inherently addresses a diversity of learners. Research on multiple intelligences for higher education has been sparse. According to Adrianna Kezar, the Director of ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, "Surprisingly, however, MI theory has not yet had any significant influence on higher education institutions." (2001, p. 141) For community colleges, research on multiple intelligences has been minimal. Although the nature of the community college is to reach a diverse population, exploration of the various intelligences has been overlooked. For community college English instructors, incorporating multiple intelligences into their teaching strategies can facilitate writing proficiency among the

diverse developmental students who have not previously achieved confidence in writing skills. I have found that intrapersonal intelligence offers a plethora of applications to help the developmental writing student progress in their writing skills. Personal narrative essays, reflective journaling, and writing prompts utilizing metacognitive strategies can support a novice writer in fluency and voice and confidence in the developmental writing classroom.

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