

Intelligences at the Table

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“Why don’t we use a Data Analysis Protocol for the kids to look at the funeral speeches?” he said. I was floored—offended—utterly resistant. The mere suggestion of looking at any part of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* as “data”! Heresy! High treason! A debacle waiting to happen—and in my classroom, no less.

In all seriousness, Peterson Toscano, close colleague and esteemed fellow CFG coach, and I had been doing this kind of thing for years, using Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory to add depth and texture to my teaching of English to ninth graders, albeit on a much less radical scale. This plan of his would be, in fact, the ultimate test of MI theory in practice: employing a protocol designed to analyze data (numbers, charts, timelines and the like) to look closely, rather, at *language*, thereby providing a way for students who are naturally alienated by Shakespeare to understand why Mark Antony’s speech is dramatically more provocative and, in the end, successful, than Brutus’.

During the ensuing class, we actually made good Peterson’s idea: we asked the students to count *words* (how many times each orator mentions Caesar, how many times he mentions Rome, how many times he refers to himself; how many total lines in each speech; how many different verbs each man uses, and how many times each is used; how many pauses, how much interaction with the Plebians, etc.). Then they charted and/or graphed their findings, deriving hypotheses as to why the Plebians respond the way they do in that scene and what the eventual outcomes of these speeches might be, using evidence from the collected data. Without prompting, students who had been almost entirely passive that year—most prominently, the math/logical and naturalist kids—eagerly pulled out calculators and pencils, and hunched over their texts with zeal. They *loved* the counting! They made connections that they genuinely would never have made otherwise and, best of all, they seemed confident, pleased, and *engaged*.

Despite this success, this class was incredibly hard for me. I had to take a gigantic leap of faith and let go not only of control, but also of myriad assumptions about how literature should be taught and, more importantly, how students might learn, if given the chance—about Shakespearean language, about thesis development, about finding and forwarding evidence to support theses. Admittedly, the kids who usually found English class easy and enjoyable were genuinely at sea and displeased. So, in

addition to confirming the power of leveraging multiple intelligences in the classroom, I learned another important thing: enlist other intelligences when possible, but don’t go too far in the opposite direction from the majority’s comfort zone. As in thoughtful CFG coaching, consider the group *and* the individual, be creative, push beyond the routine but maintain circumspection and overall balance.

This winter, I found myself at dinner in the North End of Boston after a grueling day of being Critical Friend to Ross Peterson-Veatch’s coaching at Winter Meeting, discussing with my Watkinson colleagues something that had been nagging at me for months. Why, if I have for years now so deliberately studied and implemented MI theory (to great, lasting effect, I believe) with students in my teaching, have I not been doing the same in my work with adults in my CFG coaching? Although I felt like an idiot, this conversation served as a major “Aha!” moment, and I tripped over my own tongue trying to ask all the questions that arose: What if the coach’s attentiveness to multiple intelligences really could have something to do with engagement in CFG work? Might we invite more people to the table—or people *back* to the table who have “tried” CFGs and determined that it’s not for them—by being more inclusive of all of the intelligences? What if we routinely applied the same concepts and methodologies to working with adults that we do with kids? What if we pushed ourselves to broaden our practice, make it more inclusive, more digestible for *all kinds of learners and thinkers* in our CFGs, as we do in our classrooms?

Let me speak plainly here: NSRF protocols *do* work for the people at the table and, no matter what, the content is the content—examining student work, pushing our thinking and practice as teachers and educators of all kinds. Further, there are many, many coaches and facilitators who already do what I am suggesting, because they’re smart and versatile, and because they intuitively know how to stretch and reach out to those who would otherwise be alienated by the highly cerebral, heavily verbal/linguistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal work that we generally do in CFGs.

But what about the people mentioned above, those who have never come to the CFG table or, worse, those who have *left* the table? When I look around at my school, the vast majority of these people (in both categories) are my colleagues who tend heavily towards the body/kinesthetic, (continued on page 18)



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math/logical, visual/spatial, naturalist, and musical/rhythmic intelligences. (Those with Gardner's ninth intelligence, the existentialists, can go either way, I've noticed, this no doubt depending on the Voice of the Universe and other unfathomable intangibles.) These folks, I suggest, may choose not to engage in CFG work because they either erroneously deduce from what they hear that it's strictly about reading (articles, for example), writing (reflections), and talking (as guided by whatever protocol is being employed at the time); or because they've been to a few meetings and feel that because many protocols do require a heavy dose of those things, it's not for them. They may feel anxious and alienated, just as I did when I gave my colleague Peterson the reins of my class on the funeral scene in *Julius Caesar*, and he and the students turned passionate Shakespearean verse rhetoric into data. They may feel, as I did (as our students so often do in classes whose focus does not lie within their area of cognitive strength), unequal to the task, and a little stupid and ashamed. It's not a hard leap, then, to figure that this may be a reason they leave or never even approach the table.

Case in point: In a recent CFG coaches meeting at Watkinson, our faculty did a Success Analysis protocol to look at the year—five of us, all humanities teachers, cited articles we had read (and the ensuing discussions) as the most effective, lasting work we had done this year, while the one science teacher in the room cited an exercise called the “River of Time,” in which we had charted important moments over the course of our three years together as a group. As she talked about this, I noted, she apologized more than once for choosing an exercise that most of the rest of us had not, in fact, enjoyed much at all. A highly experienced teacher and CFG coach, and a top-level administrator at our school, she felt the need to *apologize* for benefiting most from the experience in our time together that most suited her way of thinking.

So what's a coach to do? *Keep* the protocols, *keep* the content—keep articles and deep discussions and reflective practice—and use those other intelligences to open the channels of the brain to do this work. Find other ways in, embellish, give options, regard the content from various points of view, not simply or primarily the verbal/linguistic and inter-/intrapersonal ones. Examples are myriad, and there's no telling what can be accomplished once we start *deliberately* (rather than fortuitously) working in this vein. With any text-based protocol, a coach might offer up a painting, a video, a

student's art as the text to engage our visual/spatial colleagues, or have them reflect by drawing, rather than by writing. A coach could strive to get body/kinesthetic people on their feet as much as possible: when doing the Probing Questions exercise, she could demark a bull's-eye on the floor with masking tape and ask the presenter to move towards and away from the center depending on the usefulness of the question, *then* discuss why he/she moved that way; or offer up a ball to individuals working in dyads or triads and suggest that they throw it around as they talk. In another session, the coach might play music while people are writing and thinking, or give them the option of writing rhymed verse in order to answer a question or as their method of participating in the discussion (musical/rhythmic). Naturalists love to organize and categorize. As standard practice, a coach could have these colleagues do the recording for the group (giving them several different colored markers to connect, also, to their visual/spatial propensities), ask them to take the lead in chunking items in a group-generated list, suggest that they lay out their thinking, during reflection time, in a chart. Later, after a discussion, the coach might ask the group to look at the results as data and challenge them to use the data to push their thinking further. Provided with these avenues, odds are that math/logical colleagues will come to the fore, as they might also if the coach offered up statistics as text or encouraged them to think about issues in terms of timelines or graphs. And, of course, a coach can draw mindfully on protocols and exercises that already tap various intelligences: Chalk Talk, Continuum Dialogue, Wagon Wheels, El Paseo—to name only a few.

Though it may seem so, I am not advocating that CFGs should be turned into carnivals of tricks, nor am I suggesting that we turn our focus from the bona fide learning experiences with underlying seriousness of purpose that the bedrock without which CFG work would be uninteresting and of little use. Attending to multiple intelligences and planning with a practiced and balanced eye towards them, however, is another way to be attentive to group dynamics, another way to attend to the individual, another way to acknowledge and leverage all the ways people—children and adults alike—teach and learn; another way, indeed, to keep the *learner* at the center of our practice. ■

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