

The Circle of Learning and Multiple Intelligences: Teaching American Indian Children at Grand Portage

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Overlooking the North Shore of Lake Superior at Hat Point stands Ma-ni-do gee-zhi-gance, which is also known as the Little Spirit Cedar Tree. It has been there to greet travelers on this inland sea for hundreds of years.

Inland to the west, above the shore of Grand Portage Bay, is another landmark that has been around since the 1930's: one of the oldest and last remaining log school buildings in Minnesota. The Log School is a revered building in the village of Grand Portage. Most of the grandparents of today's children have attended school in that beautiful setting on the Grand Portage Chippewa Indian Reservation.

I had the privilege of teaching fourth, fifth and sixth graders in that historic and well-loved building for two-and-a-half years until the students and staff moved into a new school across the road in 1997. When I carried the

American flag across to the new structure, I thought about the traditions that would continue on and wondered how many new ones would be created in this new setting.

The circle is a traditionally important symbol in American Indian culture. As an elder once explained to me, "It can represent the Creator, the Sun, and the Moon." As a third, fourth and fifth grade teacher in the small Grand Portage community, I often visualize a circle when I recall a memory or an experience from the past in the sense that it once again returns to my life to become a useful part in a lesson, example, or activity in my classroom.

In October of 1999, I attended a special classroom entitled, "What's the Brain Got to Do With It?" during the Education Minnesota Professional Conference held in St. Paul, Minnesota. The presenter was Launa Ellison who

shared tips on how to have a brain-friendly classroom.

I was impressed and intrigued as she demonstrated her knowledge of brain-based learning research and teaching examples from her classroom. The four hours I spent on that Friday morning seemed to melt away listening to all of the new and captivating information.

I purchased her book, *Seeing With Magic Glasses* (1993) and consumed it during the following October weekend. Inspired by this new information, I set out to create a brain-friendly classroom.

I brought in more plants, purchased bean bags chair, rearranged the room, and also started to allow my students to keep a bottle of water at their desks. I don't know if my third, fourth and fifth graders noticed any of the changes at the time, but I was willing to try out the ideas of what the newest brain research was saying.

Amidst all of this restructuring, I recently enrolled in some continuing education course work. I began to think back to the theory Ellison introduced me to, Multiple Intelligences. She explained that in 1983, Dr. Howard Gardener of Harvard University expanded his theories of intelligences with a background for

the biological and cross-cultural foundations of intelligence.

He recently added an eighth type of spatial, naturalist, to his original seven: linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. His theory says everyone has all eight areas of intelligences and our mind is smart in eight different ways. Most people have a strength in one or more of these intelligences. I thought about this theory and began to do my own research on it.

Over the summer as I researched and read, I kept coming back to my elementary school's mission statement: "To provide a quality education in a safe and nurturing environment based within the culture of the Grand Portage community." More specifically, I was thinking about one of the three goals that states, "Grand Portage Elementary School students and staff will have an increased understanding of the culture of the Grand Portage community." I continued doing my literary research and looking for lesson plan ideas for the upcoming school year.

The end of the summer came, and all of the Cook County Schools staff members attended a Cultural Diversity Workshop put on by American Indian Educators. That fall I returned to my graduate

program with an understanding of multiple intelligences, but still wanted to fine tune my use of the theory with my students.

Since I am not a registered tribal member, I often feel intimidated. I am hesitant about what I convey about the Ojibwe culture.

I felt when I was teaching on an Apache Reservation in Arizona that it was a fine line between a person's culture and a person's religion. I decided to use Gardener's theory as a framework to help

me incorporate and attain the goal of our school's mission statement. Using the information presented at the cultural diversity workshop, I started to brainstorm in hope that implementing the multiple intelligence theory would work to meet our school's goal

Here are a few examples of how I've applied the eight ways of being smart in my Grand Portage classroom:

Verbal-Linguistic

In class we shared traditional stories like that of the grandmother stories. I tied in the newspaper coverage of the Third Running of the Grand Portage Passage Sled Dog Race with

reading activities during that time. Recent acquisitions of Ojibwe stories in our school's cultural library section is a great boost for students and staff to read.

Mathematical-Logical

We invited a nationally known bead work artist and her daughter to instruct the students in how to use the loom for bead work. The mathematical lessons of calculation and symmetry are woven into this favorite cultural activity.

The third graders carved their own model figure of "Paddle to the Sea" . . . The fifth graders constructed traditional toboggans . . .

Visual-Spatial

The students created Thunderbird paper and chalk shadows. Many of the students won ribbons for their artwork in the county fair. We viewed video tapes of traditional activities such as ice spear fishing and maple sugaring, which took place during the winter season. The whole school was able to paint snow snakes during the Winter Frolic held at the Grand Portage National Monument. Each student tried to glide their painted piece of wood farthest down a water-sprinkled path in the snow.

Bodily-Kinesthetic

My students were able to join their district-wide classmates

at the North-House Folk School in Grand Marais. The third graders carved their own model figure of "Paddle to the Sea". The fourth graders made model bateaus, a traditional boat used by lumbermen. The fifth graders constructed traditional toboggans in both life- and model- scale sizes.

Musical-Rhythmic

I purchased some American Indian Flute Music to try out. I started out with the artist R. Carlos Nakai and his harp guitar partner, William Eaton. I'm experimenting with the playing of pow-wow drum music during the day. It is fun trying out music available from different cultures and determining what selections work best to boost the energy in the room or calm things down.

Interpersonal

As with most classrooms, this intelligence gets to have the most practice. The students have several opportunities throughout the day to work in small or whole groups. An elder shared with me the importance of being able to work in cooperative manner to complete the seasonal activities, such as the wild rice harvest, each year.

Intrapersonal

I planned a lot of journal

writing time so each student could reflect on events and happenings in their families or in the community. Annual events such as the Rendezvous Days, Veteran's Day and Elder's Pow-wow provide excellent prompts for independent writing time and reflection. I make an effort to make sure students have a chance to practice quiet-time intelligence.

Naturalist

We tied together our fall forest unit with the spring sugar-bush season. It's always an exciting treat to have fresh maple syrup on our pancakes. Naturalists from the Grand Portage Trust Lands and from the Grand Portage State Park regularly visit our classroom with presentations. The fifth graders also get to participate in the district-wide Wolf Ridge Environment Learning Center field trip each year in March.

It has been a rewarding challenge utilizing a culturally enhanced focus with my students while also practicing and supporting each of their multiple intelligences in their lives and in my own. It has been exciting to be able to key in on the successes of my students and to let them see what they can be proud of, much of which our state-required testing does not recognize. The hesitancy

I used to feel in incorporating more of the Ojibwe culture has vanished. I have learned just as much as my students, and in many instances, they have been a great resource for me. My hope is that any educator could take these Ojibwe-inspired activity examples and utilize the theory of multiple intelligences in their curriculum.

I remember when my fourth grade teacher had a list of learning

style strengths listed next to everyone's name on her filing cabinet. Now, over twenty-five years later, I continued the circle as I focus on recognizing the strengths and areas to work on in my own student's areas of intelligences. I am looking forward to strengthening the circle as I gather more teachings and ideas from the elders and community members in Grand Portage.