

## Unit 8: Psychology and Learning Theory

There is currently much debate over the goals and methods of teaching and learning. ED 800 provided the opportunity to investigate and explore many competing approaches to educational problems and forms of educational inquiry. In addition, it focused on the essential questions of education. As an educator, it is necessary to think critically of the varying beliefs of well known educational philosophers, teachers, and scholars. Educators must be continuously reflecting upon the foundational ideas of education in order to grow and improve their teaching practices. Through studying the purposes, methods, uses, and meanings of different forms of inquiry, one can gain a better understanding of the nature of teaching and learning. I believe psychology and learning theory is an important and fruitful approach to studying education. The study and knowledge of how the mind works and how one learns is suitable for the study of particular kinds of educational problems and issues. It is also accessible and useful to teachers, scholars, administrators, and other groups interested in education.

Howard Gardner's work of inquiry as a cognitive psychologist focuses on how to teach and how one learns based on the knowledge of how the mind works. Gardner gives much attention in *The Disciplined Mind* to the "cognitive revolution" in which its main idea is "mental representation." "Cognitive psychologists believe that individuals have ideas, images, and various 'languages' in their mind-brain" (p.67). Gardner believes all human beings possess multiple intelligences, but no two people exhibit them in the same combination of strengths. Therefore, children of the same age will benefit from individualized ways of learning. This includes higher cognitive functions such as "problem-solving, problem-finding, planning, reflecting, creativity, deeper understanding" (p. 74). Individuals can self-consciously think about one's own mind, one's own thinking, and invent learning strategies that work best for themselves. Gardner also looks "beyond cognition" towards motivation and culture. Positive experiences and identification with adults, cultures, and emotions greatly enhance one's motivation. This can lead to intrinsic motivation which is much more beneficial than extrinsic motivation since one is self inspired to learn because it is fun or rewarding. Gardner states, "If one is motivated to learn, one is likely to work hard, to be persistent, to be stimulated rather than discouraged by obstacles, and to continue to learn even when not pressed to do so, for the sheer pleasure of quenching curiosity or stretching one's faculties in unfamiliar directions" (p. 76). Motivation is part of the internal mental state that is influenced by the way people grow and learn in different cultures and environments. "Knowledge arises in relations among human beings; much of what we internalize comes from the models and the motifs of others; and we ourselves elaborate upon knowledge in social settings: home, school, the wider community" (p.99). In addition, "One makes choices about what to teach, how to teach it, and why it should be taught and learned" (p. 79). These decisions are about goals and values which should be made by the community as a whole based on the psychology and learning theory.

One particular issue or concern of educators is how to best teach children. Gardner favors a student-centered approach that is "attentive to developmental and individual differences" (p.39). Through Gardner's inquiry of the mind-brain, he believes there are multiple intelligences in which each one is a form of mental representation. He feels it is unfair to teach and assess all children in the same way. Therefore, schools must be individualized and personalized. Educators need to understand each

student's specific mental representations as much as possible in order for education to allow the following two outcomes: "(1) Students encounter materials in ways that allow them access to their content, and (2) Students have the opportunity to show what they have learned, in ways that are comfortable for them yet also interpretable by the surrounding society" (p. 73). Educators also have the desire for all students to go beyond basic facts and have higher cognitive functions. This not only allows students to encounter and tackle more complex and sophisticated ideas but also prepares them for the future which is rapidly changing. Workers of the future will be required to go beyond the basics in which they need to be creative, able to anticipate and solve problems, and adapt to new and demanding situations. As a result, higher order thinking skills are more important now than ever. Teachers should help students think self-consciously about one's own mind and how one thinks in order to be aware of the kinds of strategies that work best for themselves. Furthermore, many elementary counseling programs will discuss study strategies with children and have them reflect upon which strategy works best for them so it becomes more self-conscious. This also helps one seek connections between various contents and disciplines. The Reggio Emilia School in Italy represents many of Gardner's educational goals and themes. "Reggio encourages the cultivation and elaboration of multiple representations, multiple intelligences... [Their] approach invites children to explore, in multiple, comfortable ways, the physical world, the biological world, and the social world" (p. 91). Providing these rich sensory experiences which are of interest to the children should be the aim of teaching and learning. Many educators learn about the Multiple Intelligence theory and ways to differentiate to meet the needs of individual students in college programs. However, teachers need continuous support throughout their career. It is vital that administrators support their teachers by providing them with professional development opportunities in which they can gain ideas and learn important strategies of how to best meet the needs of individual students through differentiation. However, working in a public school system presents various obstacles such as a set curriculum that teachers must follow. This limits teacher flexibility to deviate to themes that the children find most interesting. As a result, integrating the philosophies of Gardner will be a continuous work in process that will require a great deal of practice and patients by the teachers to incorporate this psychology and learning theory.

Another important issue is how students learn in relation to motivational and cultural influences. In order to facilitate and promote human learning and pedagogy, one cannot ignore the crucial factors of motivation, personality, and emotion. Gardner based this idea on how the mind works and why and how one learns. He stated, "people are not computers" (p.77). There have been studies by cognitivists that suggest how emotions influence mental representations. Gardner wants "all students to develop a sense of high standards" (p.58). The transmission of values of high standards and lifelong learning has often been stressed and instilled in certain ethnic and religious groups. As illustrated in the documentary film *Spellbound*, the influence of culture and environment played a significant role in each of the spellers. However, "those raised in a less scholastically oriented environment" may have a less appealing desire and/or lower motivation to improve one's mental skills. In addition, when there is a lack of valued moral and emotional development from the home and/or church, these children are either left without these developments or they are learned on the streets, in gangs, or from the role models in the media. In America, school project performances are usually statements of an individual child that either "thrive or falter as a consequence of the child's motivation" (p. 107). Gardner believes "Youngsters ought to be reared so they enjoy learning, develop wide-ranging interests, and want to nourish their minds for the remainder of their lives" (p. 52). Schools can "offer an alternative model of how life might be pursued" (p.49). Therefore, the decisions made by teachers, administrators, and policymakers about the implicit messages of the school environment are vital and moral ones. "Those who run the school must have a clear vision of what they want to achieve" (p.112) and should also have the knowledge of psychology and learning theory to help them make these fundamental decisions. These decisions about the goals and values of education are too important to be

left to a single person or group and should be made by the wider community. Parents, relatives, teachers, administrators, schools, the media, and various forms of technology are responsible for making sure younger individuals develop intellectually, morally, socially, emotionally, and civically so they can acquire certain values that will lead to the mastery of certain areas of knowledge and skills. As demonstrated in *Spellbound*, the entire community supported and encouraged the spellers in various ways whether the value was placed on learning or competition. Schools are a product of their society and culture. In other words, schools will be successful if the students have a strong cultural support system. As Gardner's psychology and learning theory advocates, the entire community needs to be aware of their need to contribute in any way possible for the success of their students.

Psychology and learning theory is an essential form of inquiry while reflecting upon the aims of teaching and learning. Having an understanding of the mind-brain relationship is suitable for the study of how one learns and how to teach. Information about Gardner's way of inquiry of psychology and learning theory needs to be accessible and utilized by teachers, scholars, administrators, and other groups interested in education. Gardner was not only concerned about the organization and mental processes of the brain which leads to the cognitive abilities of an individual, but also why and how one learns. Therefore, Gardner gives much attention to motivation which is greatly influenced by one's culture and environment. The exposure to this distinctive approach to inquiry will certainly improve my teaching practices. Through continuous reflection of the various approaches, methods, purposes, and goals of educational inquiry, I have learned a great deal and grown as an educator.