

Connecting preferred learning styles and multiple intelligences theory – a conversation with Nathalie Allexant and Nick Cannon

In addition to being involved in the Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme, in summer 2004 Nick Cannon, deputy headteacher at Jubilee Primary School in Hackney, and Nathalie Allexant, primary drama advanced skills teacher at Gallions Primary School in Newham, had the opportunity to visit Project Zero¹, at Harvard University, a trip organised and funded by Creative Partnerships National Office through the Department for Education and Skills. The following piece is a transcript of a discussion about these experiences with Nathalie and Nick. The discussion was facilitated by Derek Brown and Paul Howard, the consultants working on the action research programme.

What motivated you to visit Project Zero?

Nick: Since attending a course on multiple intelligences five years ago, I have been trying to develop my practice along those lines. When the Project Zero opportunity came up, my headteacher was supportive of my going and arranged to come too. She is enthusiastic about developing our practice and is supporting a visit by two more colleagues this year. Three other colleagues have completed on-line courses with Project Zero.

What was the hook for the headteacher to make that level of commitment?

Nick: She rightly saw that the focus of Project Zero was not a million miles from where we were already trying to go as a school, so this was an opportunity to fine tune or build on existing practice. We were aware of the difference that it could make to children, we already believed in the theory and now we could start to put it into practice.

How would you judge the success of the trip to Project Zero?

Nathalie: At a personal level, it reaffirmed that I am in the best job in the world. It gave me a fresh perspective on that job, strengthened my love of teaching and learning and encouraged me to reflect on my values. As the new school year approached I had many fresh ideas and felt energised to be more experimental, to take more risks. The experience left me reflecting constructively on the type of teacher I wanted to be.

Nick: It was similar for me, a lot of affirmation. I have never been comfortable with the literacy and numeracy hours and I had contemplated giving up teaching. The success of the trip to Project Zero brought new frustrations however; I had so many ideas, ideas that needed

¹ Founded in 1967, Project Zero's mission is to understand and enhance learning, thinking and creativity in the arts, as well as humanistic scientific disciplines, at individual and institutional levels.

to be shared with colleagues, but because I was stuck in my classroom I was unable to disseminate the learning from the visit. Fortunately, my headteacher saw the potential benefit of the role I could play in facilitating the progress of the school's planning and teaching. In due course, she freed me up to play a significant developmental role with colleagues.

Nathalie: Surprisingly, I felt a little depressed when the new term started. I was with a new class, an age group that I had not taught before. I had so many things that I wanted to try and felt a bit of a failure because I struggled to convert all the ideas into practical steps with an unfamiliar group. At this time, a lot of the momentum for change was directed at improving marking and assessment, as these were highlighted by the recent inspection of the school. It felt as if work on multiple intelligences was slipping from the agenda.

Nick: We've compared experiences and it is clear that we both wanted to change too much at once. As classroom practitioners we welcomed the chance to model our practice with our own groups, to invite colleagues in to see the developmental work in progress. It would have been easier to do this had I still got my old class, as I had an established working relationship with them.

It sounds as if your experience confirms that relationships are at the heart of the teaching and learning dynamic?

Nick: Yes. As I built up the relationship with the new group, multiple intelligences practice came more and more to the fore. Gradually it seeped out, into the corridor, into staff room conversation. There was increasing interest in the way I was working, and the results I was getting. Colleagues started to ask serious questions about what I was doing and about what they were doing themselves.

Can you try to break down the experience at Project Zero, to identify what made it so exciting?

Nathalie: We were allocated to study groups and by the end of the week there was a real sense of mutual support and understanding within what had started as a very diverse and disparate group. I experienced a sense of empowerment from the group and a sense of fun from the learning that we did together.

Nick: The whole experience was about understanding rather than knowledge. You know that understanding is the key to learning, but things become unstuck around Standard Attainment Tests and the like. In specific terms, the emphasis on questioning and the types of questioning techniques being modelled floored me... in a positive way.

Nathalie: Project Zero is big, but, instead of doing everything, we were encouraged to focus on the central issues and themes in some depth. All too often we try to do everything; here we experienced what it is like to concentrate on a small part of the whole picture and then bring other perspectives in and make connections.

It sounds as if the reshaping and re-ordering of knowledge was a key part of the process and that there are particular questioning strategies that are more likely to stimulate understanding. Could you illustrate this further?

Nick: When I came back, we were doing a project on Africa, based on the story 'The Masai and Me'. The project included a number of ways of looking comparatively at life in Kenya and the UK and culminated in a written piece. Regardless of how much or little the pupils had written, they were all asked to write what they thought they had learned. The responses to the question 'why did we look at the Masai?' were diverse, ranging from 'you told us to do it!', through 'to find out something about life in other countries' to 'by learning about other people I will know myself a lot better'! This specific example prompted me to think further about why I am teaching things in a particular way and where that teaching (and learning) is going.

Nathalie: If you allow yourself to be tied to the learning objectives of the National Curriculum, this degree of reflective practice is unlikely to happen. For me, it became clearer than before that questions of a particular type and quality held the key to the empowerment of children as independent learners.

To what extent have you found preferred learning styles to be an important element and how does it relate to multiple intelligences

Nick: There is an overlap between preferred learning styles (the way we receive learning) and multiple intelligences (the operational sense we make of it) and the area of overlap can be described as the quest for learning. Naturally, the components of that quest are questions... for understanding, exploring, seeing and thinking.

Nick: In my experience, once you are focusing on multiple intelligences, you are already focusing on preferred learning styles. Let me give you an example. We ran some workshops for staff on questioning techniques, using the Project Zero materials. It was noticeable that different people engaged with different styles of questioning and, through discussion, it became clear that their choices reflected fundamental learning preferences.

NC The Project Zero materials identify five forms of question (narrative, experiential, fundamental, aesthetic and logical). These five forms create opportunities for children, who think differently from their teachers and other adults, to find their own way of relating and understanding.

Nathalie: And the key point is that the questions are open-ended. This helps people make connections.

Did you find that there were questions that you/the children were more comfortable with?

Nathalie: For me, it's narrative questioning. I read a great deal and narrative questioning suits me best.

Nick: For me too. A lot of children may lean towards narrative questioning too and this may be because that's the diet they become used to in school. The five strands of questioning from Project Zero open up other possibilities.

In what ways has your practice and colleagues' changed because of your engagement with multiple intelligences and preferred learning styles?

Nick: We have introduced a new planning sheet that focuses on what the teacher does in relation to preferred learning styles. As teachers, we tend to stick to our comfort zone, our own preferred teaching style. Staff are encouraged, no, required to accommodate visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning to some extent in all lessons. So, if they start with a strongly visual input, they cannot deliver their final plenary visually.

When I reflected on my own pattern of teaching, I realised that I was shutting off a third of my class, because I was not offering sufficient diversity of access. You have to be capable of self-criticism, in order to move your practice forward.

After a recent topic on the Victorians, children were asked to represent, in whatever format they wanted, what they had learned. One boy, recalling the dark and dingy dwellings, decided to make models of spiders. When I asked him why he had produced them without legs, he advised me that he could not use scissors. I was intrigued why he had chosen a medium that was so problematic for him. On reflection, he wished he had done a dance, rather than a model. Summing up the experience, he said: 'I've learned that I'm not good at making models. I am not strong in spatial learning...' I started to interrupt him, to reassure him, but he did not permit my interjection and continued 'but I think I should get credit for trying something that I knew I was not good at.'

To what extent is the critical framework you use based on the qualities of good teaching?

Nathalie: There has to be a shift away from good teaching to good learning. All too often teaching is couched in terms of delivery. I think we should try to avoid talking about delivering lessons, because this implies a performance and edging children out of the process. A focus on learning permits a much more active role for children, encourages them to explore. 'Learning journeys' is a useful term for describing this process.

Have you encountered any obstacles in your attempts to develop practice in your schools on the basis of preferred learning styles and multiple intelligences?

Nick: Some colleagues are anxious about the development. They say 'If I give them [the pupils] a choice of how to do work they'll just paint patterns or draw.' My response is that they might for a while – although some children will rarely opt for that way of working – but that they will go on to use that experience as a springboard for other types of learning and representation. That's what I found with my own class.

Nathalie: The support and impetus of the school's senior management team, especially the headteacher, are vital elements if change is to be effected and sustained.

One problem is that there is never enough time to share. For me, that's best done by staff looking at each other's practice. Somehow, Inset does not have the same effect.

Perhaps that is because training is often delivered on a 'one size fits all' basis that does not take account of teachers' preferred learning styles. For some, showing them your practice is the best way of getting the message across, others will access it best by being told or documentation, while a third group might benefit from the opportunity to have a go.

Nick: Even with exposure to preferred learning styles and multiple intelligences, we may struggle to lose the urge to impose our own values and perceptions on what children are doing.

Nathalie: I agree. I have been trying to shift my practice to take greater account of the learning needs of individual children, especially those with special educational needs or the most able. For the former, it is about opening up multiple avenues, so that they can find a route that takes them around their blockages to learning; for the latter, it's about creating more opportunities for open-ended enquiry and independent learning. In both cases, it's a question of taking into account diverse ways of learning.

At my school, we are tackling the problem of overloading children with knowledge by slimming down the curriculum. We want to focus on a greater depth of understanding, make more cross-curricular links, create more opportunities for team teaching.

Along the lines that Howard Gardner means when he talks about covering less and uncovering more?

Nathalie: Precisely