

## A Multiple Intelligences Library By Thomas R. Hoerr

The New City School in St. Louis, MO (USA) created the world's first Multiple Intelligences library in 2005. This article explores the rationale and strategies that framed the library.

### The evolution of libraries

Libraries have been important to society and the preservation of knowledge for thousands of years. From clay tablets to papyrus scrolls, from hand-printed to mass-produced books, mankind has sought a repository for information, and libraries have played that role. Libraries have held our knowledge, protected our culture, and provided pathways for personal growth.

Thanks to Johannes Gutenberg, governments, teachers, and librarians, libraries have become much more accessible. Today, libraries offer comfortable spaces, free access, and convenient hours; they host books, magazines, copying machines, and computers. Yet by and large, libraries remain collections of books. As we planned our school library, a committee toured a half-dozen municipal and school libraries in our community. In most cases, we were struck by the contradiction between the friendliness of the staff and the narrowness of their approach. Internet access and graphic novels notwithstanding, libraries have remained fairly rigid and have ignored what we know about how we learn.

Changes in libraries are overdue. For too long we have viewed libraries as collections of only linguistic materials, designed for only linguistic learners. When that happens, libraries fail to reach their potential; they discount people who learn in other ways, and they ignore a significant portion of the population. Libraries need to reflect a more pragmatic definition of knowledge and problem-solving.

### Multiple Intelligences

In his seminal 1983 book, *Frames Of Mind*, Howard Gardner defined intelligence as solving a problem or creating a product that was valued in a culture. This pragmatic focus – artists, musicians, and counselors display intelligence, as do writers and mathematicians – was in contrast to the approach that defined intelligence by success on standardized tests, and relied on deciphering the written word or numerical algorithms as the only ways to learn. Gardner created the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI), and identified seven different intelligences: linguistic; logical-mathematical; spatial; musical; bodily-kinesthetic; interpersonal; and intrapersonal; he subsequently added the naturalist intelligence. The MI model of intellect has elicited much controversy: Traditional academicians and psychometricians, those who stake their identity on a narrow range of intelligence, tend to reject a wider, more egalitarian view of intellect. Educators who begin by working from how students learn and focus on preparation for success in life, rather than simply success in school, find MI theory to be a powerful tool for creating learning strategies.

The school that I lead, the New City School in St. Louis, MO (USA), is an independent school which enrolls 375 students, age three through grade six. We have been using MI since 1988. As we planned a new library, we wanted to ensure that our recognition of MI was present throughout the library; we wanted to make a library that supported all kinds of learning. (You can learn more about our school, including seeing photos of our MI library, at [www.newcityschool.org](http://www.newcityschool.org).)

### Our MI Library

Our school was built in 1901, as an all-girls high school with two gymnasiums. We decided to use one of the gyms (then serving as a lunchroom) for our library. This provided 3,900 square feet of space, with ceilings of 25 feet, and huge ten foot tall windows on two walls. We capitalized on this height by creating a mezzanine, a partial second floor, along one wall, and by using flowing, curved risers of steps to create balconies along the other walls. The risers provide access to the windows and serve as rows of seating.

Our library supports all of the intelligences. Some intelligences are more difficult to incorporate (supporting the Musical intelligence is a challenge), but all MI are present. That said, our library remains a linguistic place: It holds 13,500 volumes and includes reference books of all kinds, but the Linguistic Intelligence is just the beginning.

The personal intelligences – Interpersonal, understanding others, and Intrapersonal, understanding yourself – are extraordinarily important, so we worked to create spaces which support both collaborative and individual time. We created nooks and crannies where students could find time for privacy and reflection (yet be in full view) as well as providing seating which encourages dialogue. The mezzanine holds a small amphitheater which serves as a place for our librarian to use when he reads aloud – which he does to children of all ages. It collects sound, so stories can be read without distracting students who are working elsewhere in the library. The amphitheater also provides a wonderful mini-stage on which students can perform while displaying their Musical and Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligences.

Beneath the amphitheater is a circular space with dry-erase walls and a tile floor. This Spatial intelligence space is designed for wet art projects; the walls are often filled with kids' drawings and graffiti, erased nightly. Art abounds in our library and in the gallery that we created outside its entrance. The Delano Gallery hosts monthly art shows, and features work by students, staff members, students' parents, and neighbors.

Display cases adjacent to the library entrance were designed to feature students' collections, from key chains to rocks, to dolls to presidential memorabilia, and so on. Beyond being fun, this area gives students an opportunity to use their Naturalist intelligence to categorize and classify.

The second floor contains our musical center, with multiple headphones and a collection of musical CD's which tie to our curriculum and represent various cultures. It also has a conference room for staff or student use (there is another conference room on our first floor), several two-person desks, and puzzles and games. Indeed, puzzles and games are lodged throughout the library, and students use them to develop their Bodily-Kinesthetic and Logical-Mathematical intelligences. The library is the site for our school-wide tournaments in Boggle, Othello, checkers, and chess. Champions from each grade simultaneously play a faculty member.

On the top the risers – which become a balcony adjacent to the windows – there are two 40 gallon fish tanks, one for fresh water and one for salt water. This proximity encourages comparisons between fresh- and salt water biomes. (The huge windows overlook tops of trees, and we are considering how to use this space to further develop the Naturalist intelligence.)

Our computer lab is down the hall, and each classroom has computers, but we chose not to have technology play a powerful role in our library. The library has two computers which students use to check out books, the librarian has a computer, and our entire school has Wi-Fi, but we feel there is merit in children holding books and turning pages.

In addition to our full-time librarian, we also employ an MI Library Coordinator for two days each week. She creates MI Centers in the library – learning opportunities tied to our curriculum – and classes visit her. A few parents also volunteer to read to children before school begins.

The MI library is such an inviting space that we use it for staff, committee, and parent meetings, student presentations, and neighborhood get-togethers. Monthly, we open the library to our neighbors for a morning Saturday Story Time. On those occasions a teacher entertains young friends and their parents with song and stories.

Our MI library is a place for students to read and be read to, and it is a place for them to do research. Most, it is a place for them to learn and to learn how to learn. Everyone wants to come to our MI library.

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Readers who would like to continue the dialogue can reach him at [trhoerr@newcityschool.org](mailto:trhoerr@newcityschool.org)