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A Multiple Intelligences Approach to Teaching Multicultural Literature

Carol Booth Olson and Sharon Schiesl

"I bet somebody is having a party. Look! There's candles and a balloon," Jose says.

But Marisa is not so sure. "Wait a minute. That balloon is all wilted and sad looking. And the birthday candle is in an onion. Who ever heard of a birthday onion?"

"Makes you cry," Tran mumbles.

"What?" everyone asks.

"An onion makes you cry. You know, when you cut it. It must have been a pretty sad birthday."

A Look at the Classroom

The eighth grade students in Transitional ELD (English Language Development) at McFadden Intermediate School in Santa Ana Unified School District, a large urban district in Southern California with the highest percentage of limited English-speaking students in the state, have been working in groups to examine tangible items that have symbolic significance in the story "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros (6-9). Some items, like a set of stacking dolls and a Band-Aid box filled with pennies, are literally from the text. Others, like the birthday onion described above, are more interpretative in nature. After the groups speculate amongst themselves for about ten minutes, Sharon Schiesl, their instructor, calls them to order.

"Okay, class. You've all had a chance to examine these mystery items which we will encounter again when we read 'Eleven.' Based on

these items and the title, what do you predict the story will be about?" Hands go up immediately.

"What do you think, Jose?"

"Well, our group thought it would be about a birthday, and we think the person will get money because there's pennies in that Band Aid box."

As she writes this prediction on the board, Sharon responds, "A Band Aid box is a pretty curious place to put money, don't you think? What do you make of that?"

"Oh, oh." Michelle is waving her hand vigorously to get Sharon's attention. "Band Aids are for cuts and scratches and stuff. I think someone gets hurt."

"So, do you think someone physically gets hurt — like breaks an arm or something?"

Michelle ponders. "No, but maybe it's like a hurt inside. Maybe that's why there's an onion with a candle instead of a birthday cake."

"Okay. Good idea, Michelle."

Michelle's comment turns on a light for Cao. "Wait. Everything is inside something else—the Band Aid box, dolls inside dolls, all those tree rings, even the onion. Everything has layers."

"Great insight, Cao. Let's all keep our eyes out for how this idea of layers will apply to the story. I noticed that no one has mentioned the red sweater. What about that?"

The class is silent for a long minute as they reexamine the very red and very bedraggled sweater sitting in a heap on the desk. Then Juan pipes up, "Boy, that would be a crummy present. Do you suppose it belongs to a poor girl?"

"Why would you say a girl?" Imelda asks.

"Because no boy would wear a sweater like that. That's a GIRL'S sweater."

"Do you think it's important that it's a red sweater?" Sharon probes. "What does the color red say to you?"

From around the class, students yell out, "Hot. Angry. Blood. Excitement. Explosion."

"Okay. We have lots of good clues for the story we're about to read. Let's get to it."

A Theoretical Context for Implementing Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom

Sharon is taking a Multiple Intelligences approach to teaching multicultural literature in her ELD classroom based upon her work with Carol Booth Olson, Director of the National Writing Project site at the University of California, Irvine and upon her participation in a teacher research project for which Carol serves as a Principal Investigator.

Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences Even the title of this book might take some people aback. After all, "intelligence," as we all know, is a singular noun in the dictionary. However, Gardner's book questions the notion that human beings have a "unitary dimension called intelligence" (Ellison 26) that can be measured and quantified. According to Gardner, studies of cognition and neurobiology suggest that we may have a number of different intellectual strengths, or domains of intelligence: each located in discrete parts of the brain; each responsible for a particular human ability; each relatively autonomous from other human facul-

ties; and each progressing through Piagetian-like stages from the level of novice, to apprentice, to expert or master at rates which are influenced not only by heredity but by cultural values. In *Frames of Mind*, Gardner offers a provisional list and profiles of seven intelligences he has identified thus far that have the "capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural settings" (Gardner and Hatch 5). These intelligences are briefly described below:

Linguistic Intelligence

The most widely and democratically shared intellectual competence across all human beings, linguistic intelligence involves a sensitivity to the sounds, rhythms and meanings of words, as well as to the functions of language. Four aspects of linguistic knowledge have "proved of striking importance in human society" (Gardner 78): the ability to explain/inform; the ability to convince/persuade; the ability to remember; and the ability to use language to reflect.

Musical Intelligence

Often viewed as a "gift" rather than a form of thinking, musical intelligence calls for a keen auditory sense, a feel for patterns and rhythms, pitch and tonality, and an appreciation for the forms of musical expression. Whereas there is a considerable emphasis in the schools on linguistic attainment, music "occupies a relatively low niche in our culture" (Gardner 109). However, in some cultures — China, Japan and Hungary, for example—musical intelligence is highly prized.

Logical-Mathematical Intelligence

While linguistic and musical capacities have their origins in the auditory-oral sphere, logical-mathematical intelligence "can be traced to a confrontation with the world of objects" (Gardner 129). It requires sensitivity to and the ability to discern logical or numerical patterns, memory for and the capacity to handle long chains of reasoning, an appreciation of the links between propositions, and a love of abstraction and problem solving. Whereas linguistic intelligence is the

most democratically shared of all the intelligences, logical-mathematical intelligence is very unequally spread across the population. Influenced largely by Piaget, who perceived logical thought as the “glue that holds together all cognition,” (Gardner 134) and whose theories have been a driving force behind intelligence testing, logical-mathematical intelligence has been placed at a premium in the schools.

Spatial Intelligence

Spatially intelligent people have a heightened capacity to perceive the visual-spatial world and to mentally recreate aspects of visual experience—even in the absence of physical stimuli. Three components of spatial ability are: the ability to recognize the identity of an object when it is seen from different angles; the ability to imagine movement or internal displacement among the parts of a configuration; and the ability to think about spatial relations. Psychologist Rudolph Arnheim has argued that the most important operations of thinking come directly from our perceptions of the world because unless we can conjure up a visual image of a concept, we will be unable to think about it clearly.

Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence involves a well-honed sense of timing, an ability to anticipate what is coming next, control of one's body movements, overall smoothness of performance, and an automaticity of certain reflexes or activities. While athletes, like Olympic diver Greg Louganis, clearly possess the qualities described above, actors also rely on bodily-kinesthetic intelligence for a successful performance, for the delivery of their lines has no authenticity or power without the communication that comes from body language.

The Personal Intelligences

Two forms of intelligence that are almost virtually ignored by students of cognition are **intrapersonal** and **interpersonal** intelligence. It is easy to understand how those that see a clear

division between thought and emotion would relegate both intrapersonal intelligence (access to one's own feeling life) and interpersonal intelligence (ability to read the intentions and desires of others) solely to the affective domain. However, Gardner sees the personal intelligences as “information-processing capacities—one directed inward, the other directed outward” (243). The integration of these two intelligences, which leads to a firmly developed sense of self, “appears as the highest achievement of human beings” (279). It is important to note that just as it takes the integration of the personal intelligences to foster a well-developed sense of self, so too it is the interaction and integration of “complexes of intelligences functioning together smoothly, even seamlessly” (279) that enables us to engage in and execute intricate human activities.

Gardner's work has given rise to more than a few “Ahas” for Sharon, Carol, and the other teachers in the special interest group. As “English teachers, they had all tended to favor their own intellectual comfort zone, the medium of words, and to lead with their strong suit, to use an analogy, often leaving certain “players” in their classrooms out of the game. It didn't immediately occur to them that art, drama, music, or even mathematics could provide pathways into the world of print. When students didn't understand their writing assignments in the past, these teachers often read them again to the class — only LOUDER. They also had to nod their heads and say *mea culpa* to Gardner's observation that teachers tend to be unconsciously drawn to those students who share their own intellectual preferences. How often have we all passed over the student who, with head slightly bowed, was staring intently into the grain of his/her desk, to call upon the student whose body language said, “I like this!”?

Their second “Aha,” which they gleaned from Gardner, was about students. Not only did students all have different kinds of minds and ways of learning, they all had areas of intellectual strength— some of which were more or less valued and accessed in school. Given that teachers have an obligation to provide all children with an opportunity to learn and to feel successful, it is vital to tap, identify, and capitalize upon each

student's strengths and to use those intellectual competencies as a bridge to reach and foster their less developed or less practiced intelligences.

For Sharon and Carol, this recognition rang particularly true for English language learners who may not yet have the linguistic competence in the target language to adequately express their comprehension of the subject matter. In designing the integrated language arts lesson on "Eleven"—which attempts to facilitate not just students' reading and writing skills but their interpretive thinking as well—they chose to focus particularly on kinesthetic and spatial forms of aesthetic communication and used those intelligences as bridges to practice written communication. They also recognized the need to "enfranchise" students of ethnic and linguistic minority background by enabling them to see themselves represented in the literature they read—not just as a nod to Martin Luther King Day or Cinco de Mayo or Asian Studies Week—but as an ongoing part of the core curriculum. The work of Sandra Cisneros resonates for secondary students of all cultures because much of it is based upon the themes of growing up and establishing one's identity.

The Lesson

Prediction Activity

The lesson began with the prediction activity previously described. The tangible items provided a concrete "hook" for beginning to interpret the symbolism in the story.

Reader's Theater

Once the stage was set for the story, the students literally *performed* the story as a Reader's Theater, using the props the students had already discussed. A Reader's Theater enables students to kinesthetically dramatize the story by acting out the script as they read it. An excerpt from the script is as follows:

Rachel's Narrator: Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody,

Mrs. Price: "Now, Rachel, that's enough,"

Rachel's Narrator: because she sees I've shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

Mrs. Price: "Rachel,"

Mrs. Price's Narrator: Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad.

Mrs. Price: "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

Rachel: "But it's not —"

Mrs. Price: "Now!"

Mrs. Price's Narrator: Mrs. Price says.

Rachel's Narrator: This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me—ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and one—are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through the sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

Marginalia

After checking the actual events in the story against their predictions, students reread the text closely. In Sharon's class, it was necessary for her to reread the text aloud to the class, and to model for the students how to analyze a text closely and to make marginal notes.

ELEVEN by Sandra Cisneros

When they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you

are—underneath the year that makes you eleven.

*So, you really are like
a set of stacking dolls
with the person you were
last year inside the person
you are this year.
I feel like this when it's my
birthday too. It takes a while
to feel like you're the
next year old.*

Illustrated Group Work

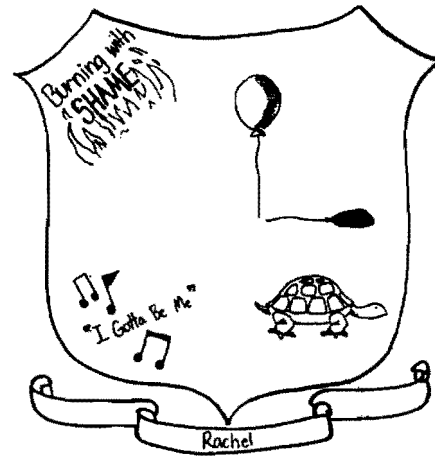
To help the students spatially render the symbolism in the story, they were asked to undertake two of the four tasks described below. Each task involved illustrating their understanding of the text and also explicating that understanding in writing.

Coat of Arms

Students were asked to create a Coat of Arms for Rachel after filling out a frame like the one below.

- If Rachel were an object she would be a balloon that's popped by the teacher.
- If Rachel were a song she'd be "I Gotta Be Me" because she can't be who Mrs. Price says.
- If Rachel were an emotion it would be SHAME because Mrs. Price makes her feel humiliated.
- If Rachel were an animal it would be a turtle because she goes into her shell and will not talk.

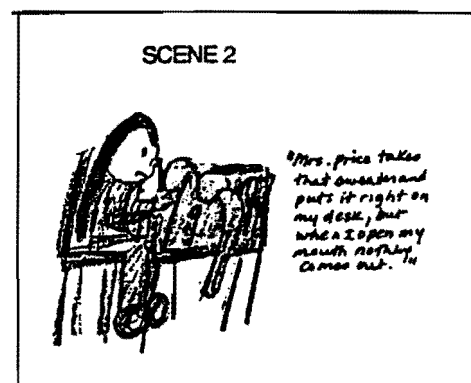
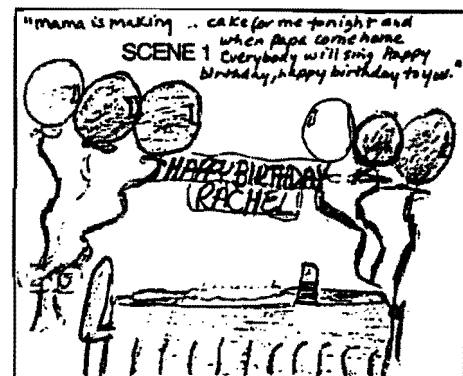
Other framing sentences include time of day, season, word, day of week, animal and season.



Christine

Story Board

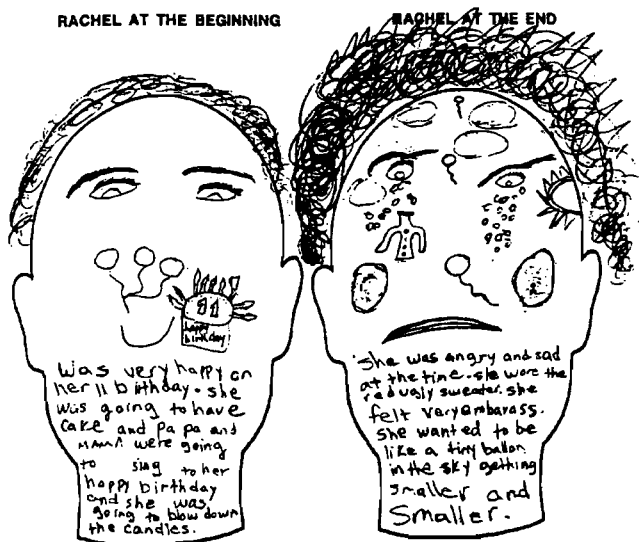
The story board activity involved dividing a piece of paper into six squares, sketching the most crucial scenes, in order, and inserting crucial lines from the text. Two story board squares are as follows:



Kam

Open Mind

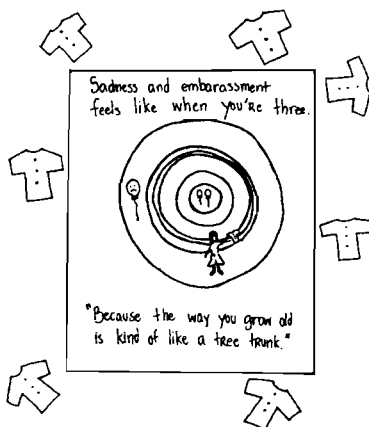
In the twin Open Minds below, students depicted Rachel's thoughts and feelings before and after the incident with the red sweater.



Jesus

Literature Portrait

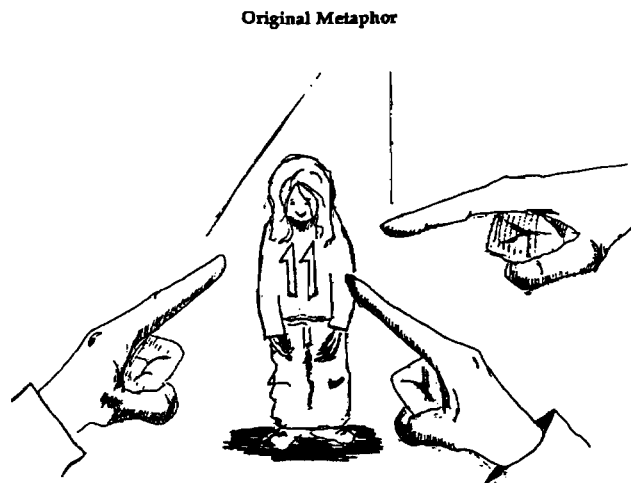
In literature portraits, students were asked to conceptualize the story as if it were a painting. First, they had to create a border for their portrait and decorate it with words or images from the story. Second, they had to draw the BIG IDEA of the story in the center of the portrait. Third, in their own words, they had to write the theme of the story. Finally, they had to select a quote from the story that best illustrates the theme.



David

Original Metaphor

Once students had explored the symbols in the story closely, they were asked to come up with their own original simile/metaphor for what it would feel like to be Rachel and to draw that metaphor. Carol had assumed that providing the example below would clarify this task.



I bet Rachel feels like she's in a line up with the bright lights beating down on her and the perspiration running down her neck. "You," Mrs. Price says, "number 11. Step forward. That's her. That's the red sweater criminal. She's the one."

However, the cognitive leap of moving from analyzing symbols and metaphors in the story to creating one's own metaphor proved to be beyond the students. So, Sharon backtracked and inserted an activity which involved the students in creating similes and metaphors for themselves:

What animal are you most like?

I am like a bird because I love to sing.

What plant are you most like?

I am like a dandelion because I am strong and hard to get rid of.

What shape are you most like?

I am like a circle because I keep going and going, etc..

Once students had explored figures of speech to represent themselves, they were able to grasp how to do the same for Rachel.

Rachel is no red sweater. She is cashmere and silk!

Kathleen

Rachel feels like a warm coke after some one shakes it.

Susan

Rachel feels like the winter, cold and rainy.

Susana

The red sweater made Rachel feel like a frozen-dead tree with snow.

Cao

Prompt

Students were now ready to receive the writing prompt.

Pretend you are Rachel from Sandra Cisneros's story "Eleven." As Rachel, write a letter to another character in the story describing how you felt about what happened to you in class with Mrs. Price and the red sweater. You may write as Rachel at the age of eleven or project yourself into the future. As you describe your thoughts and feelings about the incident, use at least one metaphor to describe you (Rachel) from the text and at least one metaphor of your own. Write your letter in standard friendly letter form: greeting, body, closing. Be sure you use correct spelling, punctuation and sentence structure to make your letter impress your audience.

Character Chart

To help the students decide who to write to, Sharon provided a character chart in which students examined each character mentioned in the story, what he/she did, Rachel's response, and what the student would do if he/she were in Rachel's place.

CHARACTER CHART			
CHARACTER	What He/She Did	Rachel's Response	What I Would Do If I Were Rachel
Mama			
Papa			
Sylvia Saldivar			
Phyllis Lopez			
Mrs. Price			

Quickwrite

To put themselves into Rachel's persona, students then did a five-minute quickwrite, as if they were Rachel, before beginning to write their papers.

You remember that ugly big, red mountain you put on my desk and accused me of it being mine. You believed Sylvia Saldivar when she said it was mine! But we both know it wasn't. You didn't even care of what I was going to say.

Karina

Student Writing

Sharon and Carol were both gratified by the way in which the students in this ELD class stretched their reading, thinking and writing skills in taking a multiple intelligences approach to this assignment. By exploring their understanding of the text both kinesthetically and spatially, both in groups (interpersonally) and alone (intrapersonally), they were able to come up with thoughtful interpretations of the story and rich personal metaphor to enhance their written expression. One student's finished draft is as follows:

Epilogue

The students are sitting in groups examining a square cage with a small towel inside it and a sign on the side that says "Algernon."

"I don't see anything moving," Jose says. "She's just tricking us."

"Well, what is an Algernon anyway?" Lihn asks.

"It's a name. Get it. Like for a rat or something," Jose retorts. "But I don't see it moving, like I said. Maybe it's under that towel through, sleeping or something."

"We'll just have to wait and see what Mrs. Schiesl does next," Jesus chimes in. "I bet we're going to read something good. And I bet that cage will have something to do with it."

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Karina Alejo, 11-30-95, Period 1-2, Mrs. Schiesl

Dear Mrs. Price,

Do you remember me? I am Rachel. I was in your 6th grade class in 1985. I was the skinny little girl that was shy and was a loner. Now I am 22 years old. I am in college now studying to be a teacher.

It was eleven years today when you embarrassed me in front of all of my classmates. Today is my birthday! Also, eleven years ago you made me the most unhappy eleven-year-old in the world. It all started with that ugly red sweater.

You remember that ugly, big, red mountain you put on my desk and accused me of it being mine. You believed Sylvia Salvidar when she said it was mine! But we both know now that it wasn't mine. You didn't even care of what I was going to say. You didn't say you were sorry when Phyllis Lopez admitted it was hers. Also when I cried in front of all of my classmates you just turned to page 32 and math problem number 4. The sweater was "not mine, not mine, not mine!" I wanted to be invisible like when a balloon gets away from you and looks like a little tiny "o" in the sky. You close your eyes to see it and soon it's gone. That's what I wanted to be.

I guess I am like the fall season. Every year I change my leaves and every year I am a different color of leaves. I have changed and learned a lot since 6th grade. I am studying to be a teacher to help all the other Rachels in sixth grade and help them not go through what you made me go through.

Well, now it's goodbye because I have no more to say. I am just happy that I got that out of me.

Sincerely,

Rachel