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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Iolrachas éirime na nOileánach
(Multiple Intelligences among the Islanders)

Paper delivered by Áine Hyland, University College, Cork at "Oideachas agus Oiliúint ar an mBlascaoid" - Céiliúradh an Bhlascaoid 2001

(7 Deireadh Fomhair 2001)

At yesterday's panel discussion on education on the islands, the point was made very compellingly by our colleagues from Oileán Chléire and other islands that the educational needs of island children can often be more diverse than the needs of mainland children and certainly than what is often provided for them by a conventional school setting. Reference was made to the wealth of learning resources which island children encounter naturally in the course of their day to day living. The beauty and richness of the environment in which island children live and which surrounds them so totally was referred to as was the extent to which they have to learn to cope with the ever-changing weather-patterns and tides which surround them.

In the absence of individual "experts" in a variety of subjects such as medicine, veterinary, nursing, education, and law, island people themselves have to take on many and varied roles depending on the needs of their neighbours at any one time. Hence, expertise that a professional in a well-populated mainland region might have learned in a university environment over a long period of years, might well have to be gleaned informally by a relatively unschooled island man or woman. In spite of their lack of formal education, island people are often exceptionally gifted storytellers. This gift is very obvious in the literature of the Blasket Islands and is referred to by many of those who have written about life in the Blaskets. For example Joan and Ray Stagles in their book *The Blasket Islands - next parish America* referred to the three great writers Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Peig Sayers and Maurice O'Sullivan in the following terms[1]:

> None of them had more than a basic village school education, yet their writings have delighted men and women from all walks of life. It is one of the curiosities of their fame that although in Ireland they are rightly admired as writers in Irish, they are known chiefly through the English translations of their works. The English scholars, notably Robin Flower, Kenneth Jackson, and George Thomson, who encouraged their work, however, would never have known these islanders except for West Kerry's thoroughly deserved reputation for pure Irish speech and traditional Irish lore. They would never have suggested that they write autobiographies if they had not been so impressed through conversation and friendship with the islanders' wonderful natural capacity for telling a good story.

[1] J. and R. Stagles *The Blasket Islands: Next Parish America* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1980), p. 107.

These realisations, and a renewed reading of some of the Blasket books, especially *Peig, an tOileánach and Fiche Bliain ag Fás,* led me to ponder why we have made assumptions - as we have done together with many so-called educated people for the past hundred years - about the nature of intelligence and who we regard as "intelligent" people.

The Debate on Intelligences

Few topics generate as much controversy as that of intelligence. Throughout the ages, philosophers and educationalists have sought to understand and define human intelligence. In ancient Greece, the philosophers debated the nature of wisdom, and the links between the intellect and the body. Some writers claim that Socrates and other Greek philosophers helped to form the view of intelligence that is still prevalent today, i.e. the capacity for abstract reasoning in language and mathematics. The hypothesis that people are born with innate knowledge also dates from that period.

Around the 17th century, the debate on intelligence was rekindled, and in the last century or so, the development of scientific understandings, and of biological research added a new impetus to the debate. Research on intelligence has drawn on a number of disciplines and has been undertaken by psychologists, educationalists, geneticists, sociologists, neurologists and anthropologists.

Definitions of intelligence vary considerably, but in most Western societies, intelligence has until recently been regarded as a capability to understand abstract concepts and solve problems logically. The intelligent person is also assumed to have highly-developed skills of literacy and numeracy, and to succeed in linguistic and logical learning. "Intelligent" people are referred to as "bright", "clever", "smart" and "able". Conversely, the terms "weak", "slow", "dim", "dull" are applied to those who are regarded as lacking "intelligence", especially in the school context. We tend to think of intelligence as being in a person's head. Intelligence when manifested as 'practical' ability is often termed a 'talent', a 'gift', or a 'skill', but not an 'intelligence'. However, across the world, understandings of intelligence are many and varied.

> Notions about intelligence vary over time, across cultures, and even within cultures. Definitions of intelligence depend on whom you ask, their methods and levels of study, and their values and beliefs. Definitions are associated with the needs and purposes of different cultures. In various traditional cultures, intelligence, or "using one's mind well" is often linked to skill in dealing with other people . . . Among Western designers of intelligence tests, definitions have emphasised an ability to solve abstract problems.[2]

Binet's Intelligence Tests

Around the beginning of the 20th century, there was a growing interest in a number of western countries in developing instruments or tests to measure intelligence[3].

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[2] H. Gardner, M.L. Kornhaber and W.K. Wake *Intelligence - Multiple Perspectives* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996) p. 29.

[3] For a fuller discussion of this topic, see P. Naughton "The Debate on Multiple Intelligences" in Á. Hyland, *Multiple Intelligences, Curriculum and Assessment* (University College Cork, 2000).

This movement to measure human ability or "intelligence" peaked some decades after the introduction of mass schooling. It is likely to have been motivated by the awareness that some children benefited more from schooling than others. If a test or tests were developed which could identify children with "low intelligence" early on in their school life, then perhaps some form of extra support or remediation might be provided for them. It was in this context that psychologist Alfred Binet, along with Théodore Simon, developed his intelligence tests, devised to predict the success or failure of children in Paris schools. The Binet-Simon tests computed a "mental age" for children. Binet had examined intelligence by looking at higher-order thinking skills such as comprehension, judgement, reasoning and invention. Some years later, William Stern, a German psychologist, used a mathematical formula to devise the "intelligence quotient" or IQ, which, in the popular mind, became synonymous with intelligence.

In recent years there has been much justifiable criticism of intelligence tests, especially of the way in which they have been used and abused inside and outside the educational system. A common criticism of intelligence tests is that they actually measure only a portion of human abilities, while a wide range important human attributes is ignored. Intelligence tests have traditionally ignored a whole range of human skills and abilities that are essential for survival.

In fairness to those who developed intelligence tests, it should be pointed out that Binet looked to a great variety of kinds of human behaviour to gauge intelligence, and maintained that intelligence involved a good deal more than that captured by the test score. Moreover, he never believed intelligence was an unchanging or fixed attribute of a person, and he did not argue that intelligence was inherited.

The word "Intelligence" in the Irish language.
A person who is regarded as intelligent in one culture is not necessarily so regarded in another. For example, if book learning is held in high esteem in a culture, an intelligent person is likely to be deemed to be a person who has had many years of formal schooling. In some tribal or ethnic communities, the quiet reflective person whose every word is measured and ponderous, is regarded as the intelligent person. Conversely, in some modern contexts, the person who reacts and responds to an issue speedily (and perhaps noisily) is often regarded as the intelligent person (for example, buyers on the Stock Exchange). In a farming or sea-faring environment, the intelligent person might well be regarded as the person who is in tune with the environment and with the climate.

In Ireland, academic scholarship has been held in high regard since before Christian times. The bardic tradition of poetry pre-dated Christianity and bardic schools continued to flourish for at least a thousand years after St. Patrick came to Ireland. Following the Christianisation of the country from the fourth century A.D. onwards, a long tradition of oral culture was paralleled by a new found interest in scribal culture. Many of the young men who became monks in the many monasteries of Ireland, were involved in transcribing the Christian Gospels – leaving a legacy of historically impressive books such as the Book of Kells, the Book of Durrow and many other manuscripts. These manuscripts were beautifully illustrated – thus developing within the country an interest and expertise in art. Wood and stone sculptures proliferated and silver and gold smithing developed in the creation of religious vessels and

artefacts. Artists who were involved in creating these artefacts were undoubtedly regarded as "intelligent" within their circles. Ireland was known as the Island of Saints and Scholars during the final centuries of the first millennium.

Following the invasions of the Vikings and the Normans in the late centuries of the first millennium and the early centuries of the second millennium, the monastic tradition died out. However, the interest in more academic forms of learning remained and is evident in the work of the indigenous Irish bards who kept a tradition of poetry and writing alive until well into the middle ages. Hence it can be seen that academic learning has a long history in Ireland and within that tradition, intelligence and scholarship might well have been regarded as synonymous.

However, as an island country, Ireland also has a long agricultural and sea-faring tradition. The so-called "intelligent" person working on the land or on the sea was not necessarily a person of book learning. He was as likely to be a "wise" man as a "learned" man – a man who was sensitive to the elements and to his environment; who was successful in harvesting his land or the surrounding waters. Tomás Ó Criomhthain's description in *An tOileánach*[4] of the occasion on which he and the Yank went out to check the lobster pots, is good example of how an experienced island fisherman could be attuned to the natural environment around him. The description in question refers to the Yank's understanding of the seals which inhabited the waters surrounding the Blaskets:

(Insert par. N'iorbh fhada go raibh and lá geal go maith etc….)

Similarly, the ability of the island writers to paint a word picture of their physical environment, suggests a people who were not just linguistically sophisticated, but whose visual sophistication was developed way beyond what years of teaching and training in a College of Art could have provided. There are numerous examples of vividly-painted word pictures in *Peig* and *Fiche Bliain ag Fás.* The following is one[5]: (Insert paragraph from p. 41 Fiche Bliain ag Fás starting "Bhí sé ag eirí déanach …..)

Given the diversity of views as to what might constitute intelligence in Ireland, it is not surprising that there is no one word for intelligence in the Irish language. The English word "intelligent" can be translated into a number of different words– depending on the context in which the word is being used. The word "éirimiúil" is probably the word which most closely approximates the English word "intelligent" but it is not often used by ordinary people. The word "cliste" is probably most often used to denote intelligence or cleverness. "Duine Cliste" is a "clever" person – clever with positive connotations – but that intelligence is not confined to academic learning. It can encompass creativity, talent and skills in a wide range of areas. "Duine Glic", on the other hand, is also a clever person, but he/she is usually intelligent in pursuit of his/her own interests. That intelligence might be manifest in the evasion of payment of debt or taxes; or in escaping from deserved punishment. Irish myths and legends contain many examples of the "duine glic" who through his wiles and often his discursive skills escaped from potentially tricky situations. "Duine Críonna" is a wise or sagacious person – worldly wise from the experience of many years. In ancient

[4] T. Ó Criomhthain *An tOileánach,* p. 194.
[5] M. Ó Súilleabháin *Fiche Bliain ag Fás,* p.41

Irish myths and legends, such a person was often depicted as a reflective old man or woman, looked up to by neighbours and called on to help to settle local disputes. Yet another word which infers intelligence in the Irish language, is the word "stuama" – "duine stuama" is solid, reliable and sensible – an important form of intelligence in certain situations. In addition to the above words, modern dictionary translations of the word intelligent include the words "intleachtúil" (derived from the English word intellectual) and "tuisceanach"- which translated directly means "understanding".

In the context of the history of Irish education, it is of interest to note that intelligence was regarded in the late 19th and early 20th century as a trait that could be developed and stimulated in a young person by an appropriate curriculum and by active learning. Reports of school inspectors at the turn of the century commented on the positive effects on children's "intelligence" of the Revised (1900) Programme for National Instruction. This programme had replaced the Results Programme of the late 19th century, which had encouraged rote learning and placed a heavy emphasis on the three Rs. The Revised Programme, on the other hand, influenced by Froebellian principles, encouraged the children to be active agents in their own learning and to learn by doing. Teachers were seen as facilitators of learning rather than purveyors of knowledge. Some school inspectors maintained that as a result of this approach, an improvement was discernible "in the children's intelligence" – thus indicating their view that intelligence was not a fixed capacity, as would subsequently be argued in other countries.

We have no information as to whether an improvement was discernible in the "intelligence" of the Blasket Island children as a result of the Revised Programme. But we can take it that the fact that they were allowed after 1900 to be taught through the medium of Irish - the only language most of them understood - must have been of some help in making their school lives easier and in improving their learning. In 1883, the manager of the Blasket Island school had written in despair to the school inspector of the area that "the children understand scarcely a word of what they read - that they do not in fact understand an unusual question asked of them by Inspector, priest or teacher". He went on to state[6]:

> English is in truth a modern or foreign language to these children - a language of which they hear not one word in their homes or intercourse with one another. … How absurd to place the same programme (of instruction) before the Irish speaking children of the bogs, mountains and wilds of west Kerry as is required of the children of Belfast, Dublin or Cork whose homes and whose surroundings are a constant school. And how discouraging to teachers and children to put before them a standard which is practically unattainable.

While educational policy makers in Ireland in the mid decades of the twentieth century were undoubtedly aware of IQ or similar tests within the education systems of other western countries, such tests did not feature in the Irish education system. IQ tests capable of being administered through the Irish language were never developed – this alone would have militated against their use in Ireland following Independence in 1922, when there was considerable emphasis on the Irish language within education.

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[6] Quoted in Dr. M. NicCraith "Primary Education on the Great Blasket" in the *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society,* No. 28, 1999. p.96.

Policy-makers in newly independent Ireland were also suspicious of philosophies and developments which were culturally alien and this was undoubtedly a barrier to the importation and use of IQ and other tests developed abroad.

The theory of Multiple Intelligences

In recent decades, there have been many challenges to the "dipstick" notion of intelligence[7] and to the idea that intelligence is inherited, fixed and measurable. One of the most notable challenges to this theory has come from Howard Gardner, a neuro-psychologist from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Gardner defines intelligence as a "biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture"[8]. In the early 1980s, he proposed his theory of Multiple Intelligences in his book *Frames of Mind.*[9]

In his original elaboration of MI theory, Gardner proposed that all humans have at least seven identifiable intelligences - he later (in 1997) added an eighth and is currently considering a ninth intelligence - spiritual intelligence. The eight intelligences are as follows:

- *Linguistic Intelligence* allows individuals to communicate and make sense of the world through language (poets, journalists, writers, orators);
- *Logical-mathematical Intelligence* enables individuals to use and appreciate abstract relations (scientists, mathematicians, philosophers);
- *Musical Intelligence* allows people to create, communicate, and understand meanings made out of sound (singers, musicians, composers);
- *Spatial Intelligence* makes it possible for people to perceive visual or spatial information, to transform this information, and to recreate visual images from memory (architects, engineers, sculptors);
- *Bodily-kinesthetic Intelligence* allows individuals to use all or part of the body to create products or solve problems (craftspeople, dancers, surgeons, athletes, choreographers);
- *Interpersonal Intelligence* enables individuals to recognise and make distinctions about others' feelings and intentions (parents, teachers, politicians, psychologists, salespeople);
- *Intrapersonal Intelligence* helps individuals to distinguish among their own feelings, to build accurate mental models of themselves, and to draw on these models to make decisions about their lives (difficult to observe in specific occupations, but relevant to most);
- *Naturalist Intelligence* allows people to distinguish among, classify, be sensitive to, and use features of the environment (farmers, gardeners, botanists, florists, geologists, archaeologists)[10].

The eight areas represent what Gardner currently regards as the range of intelligent human functioning. While each area is identified as a discrete

[7] Where one metaphorically inserts a measuring "dipstick" into a person's brain to measure intelligence!
[8] H. Gardner *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences in the 21st Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 34.
[9] H. Gardner *Frames of Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
[10] Condensed from S. Veenema, L. Hetland and K. Chalfen, *The Project Zero Classroom: New Approaches to Thinking and Understanding,* (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1997)

intelligence, each also interacts with others in complex ways to produce the richness of human behaviour and achievement. Ordinary human functioning requires such interaction. Many people will exhibit a highly-developed intelligence, not perhaps in their occupation, but in pastimes, interests, hobbies, in personal projects, or in social and personal relationships.

Multiple Intelligences among the Islanders.

When I first heard Gardner speak about his theory of Multiple Intelligences in the early 1990s, I was immediately struck by how comfortably it fitted with the life of Irish people, especially rural and island people. My first reaction was to think of the Blasket books - especially of Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach;* Muiris Ó Súilleabháin's *Fiche Blian ag Fás;* and Peig Sayers' *Peig.*

The linguistic intelligence of the islanders is so well documented in these books - Peig's natural facility with language, Muiris O Suilleabhain's ability to paint a vivid and unforgettable picture with words.(Quote p. 40 from Fiche Bliain ag Fas Bhi an ghrian ag maolu siar anois…) The interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences of the islanders come across again and again in the books - intelligences that were essential for the families co-existing in close proximity to each other and with such dependence on each other. In Peig we read (on p. 150 as follows: Ansan sea thosnaigh an chaint and an chadrail…..)

Padraig O Maoleoin also writes about the interpersonal intelligence of the islanders in his bi-lingual book recently published by the Office of Public Works on the Blaskets[11]: (p.27 - Thus chomh maith a bhi an Dail, mar a thugaidis ar thigh and Phoncain …. _

O Maoleoin also refers to the musical intelligence of the islanders. On page 29 he writes: Ce gur bheag ceol a bhi ar an mintir …….

The naturalist intelligence of the islanders is referred to earlier and is particularly apparent in an tOileánach. Summarising this, O Maoleoin writes as follows: (p. 7 - Ar an iascach is mo a thangadar suas, dorn pratai etc….)

Conclusion

My talk today has barely touched on the wealth of examples which abound in the Blaskets literature about the multiple intelligences of the islanders. If any literature can bring us down to earth about what matters in schooling, the Blaskets literature can and does. It challenges us to re-think what schooling should be all about; why we focus on what we focus on in the curriculum; why we ignore what we ignore and why (consciously or otherwise) we imbue our schooling system with a value system that may no longer be relevant for our young people - if indeed it ever was! Perhaps this is an over-challenging thing to say, but if we cannot allow our imaginations to run riot in Dun Chaoin, where can we do so? The 21st century will provide amazing new opportunities and challenges for all of us and especially for the future generations. It is timely and appropriate at this time and in this place that we address these questions.

[11] P. O Maoleoin *Na Blascaoidí; The Blaskets* (Dublin: Office of Public Works, n/d.)