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Answer Sheet

# Howard Gardner, creator of 'multiple intelligences' theory, launches new project on 'good' education



By **Valerie Strauss** October 1, 2014

World-renowned developmental psychologist [Howard Gardner](#) revolutionized the fields of psychology and education when he published his 1983 book "[Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences](#)," which detailed a new model of human intelligence that went beyond the traditional view that there was a single kind that could be measured by standardized tests. (You can read his account of how he [came up with the theory here](#).) Gardner's theory initially listed seven intelligences which work together: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal; he later added an eighth, naturalist intelligence and says there may be a few more. The theory became highly popular with K-12 educators around the world seeking ways to reach students who did not respond to traditional approaches, but over time, "multiple intelligences" wrongly became synonymous with the concept

of “learning styles.” (You can read [a piece here by Gardner](#) explaining the difference.)

The author of numerous books on intelligence and creativity, Gardner teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he has launched a new effort called the “[Good Project](#).” It is, according to its [website](#), a large-scale effort to identify individuals and institutions that exemplify work that is “excellent in quality, socially responsible and meaningful to its practitioners — and to determine how best to increase the incidence of good work in our society.” In this post he explains why he launched the “Good Project” and what he hopes it will accomplish.

By Howard Gardner

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If you were to ask people what one needs to be successful, there is a likely answer: “to be smart and work hard”—or, more tersely, “wit and grit.”

Indeed, I would once have given this answer—but decades of research and reflection have convinced me that this answer is limited at best and, more likely, fundamentally wrong-headed.

Many years ago, I began to pick apart the notion of intelligence as defined and hardly ever challenged by the makers of psychological tests. I surveyed several disparate sources of information: the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in diverse cultures over the millennia; the intellectual profiles of special populations like prodigies and savants; and what was then known about the location of different capacities in different regions of the brain.

Armed with a set of criteria drawn from different disciplines, I identified seven separate intelligences. All human beings possess these seven intelligences, but we differ from one another in which are strong; and in any case, strength or weakness in one (say spatial intelligence) does not predict strength or weakness in another (say, interpersonal or musical intelligence).

I would now add a few more intelligences to the list, and others, most famously Daniel Goleman, have proposed yet other intelligences like emotional intelligence. I am no longer invested in my particular set of intelligences. For me, the important advance is that a multiplicity of intelligences has been acknowledged—*wits*, rather than *wit*.

Academic and other forms of intelligence are clearly important. But in recent years, it's increasingly recognized that other human capacities are also relevant, and they have been dubbed “non-cognitive skills.” Typically included on the list are such valued capacities as empathy, kindness, and imaginativeness. Topping the list these days is the capacity dubbed “grit.” Brought to public awareness by psychologist Angela Duckworth and journalist Paul Tough, grit denotes perseverance, stick-to-ited-ness, and the daily, weekly, and yearly accumulation of valued skills and personal traits.

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No one would oppose grit—indeed, I value it in my children and grandchildren, my students, and in myself (those hours of piano practice over the course of a decade were not wasted!). And yet, one is stopped in one's tracks once one realizes that Nazi youth and the Gestapo had plenty of grit, as did Don Corleone and Don Quixote. Two well-known books with ironic titles signal the limits of grit in isolation. David Halberstam's “The Best and the Brightest” chronicles the all-too-direct march in the early 1960s from the halls of the Ivy League to the jungles of Vietnam. More recently, “The Smartest Guys in the Room” details the cautionary tale emanating from the board room of Enron. Listed among the most valued companies on the planet at the turn of the millennium, energy company Enron was actually a paper tiger. And when its massive deceptions were unfrocked, thousands lost their jobs, while few of the leadership team were more than chastised.

Clearly, grit alone is not enough. We need to encourage grit that is directed,

honestly and publicly, to positive societal ends; and to unmask grit that has been mobilized in damaging directions, whether en route to a pointless war or to unfairly rewarded manipulators of facts, figures, and fuel fees. As part of our research endeavors, my colleagues and I have created "The Good Project" and "The GoodWork Toolkit." These efforts, along with those of many individuals, groups, and organizations around the world, seek to modify the value-neutral term "grit" with the adjective "good." Indeed, a multiple intelligences school in Manila, Philippines, has a curriculum which deliberately melds good work to the use of each intelligence. It also awards citizens who exemplify good work in one or other of the several intelligences.

To be sure, none of us can claim that we have the ultimate definition or secret of goodness. Yet I believe that open discussion of values and of ethical dilemmas, as well as reflection on what went wrong and why and what can be done better next time, is the course to follow. It should happen at home and at the workplace. But it should also be highlighted at every school in the world.

I've left room for one other element in my opening question: what does it mean to "succeed?" Of course, it is crucial to unpack this word, and to indicate whether success means accumulated wealth and/or worldwide fame and/or personal pleasures; or whether it entails caring for family and friends, or helping to build a better, fairer, more sustainable community, society, or planet. Few individuals are going to frankly announce a purely selfish definition of success; only disinterested others can judge how each of us actually conceptualizes and pursues success. My own hope: success lies in serving well the several communities in which we live.

In this era of succinct messaging, I've created a twitter-short formula:  
Multiple Wits and Good Grits Lead to a Success Beyond Selfies.

Valerie Strauss covers education and runs The Answer Sheet blog. [Follow @valeriestrauss](#)

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