

Q &amp; A

# There's no app for answering deep questions

By **Karen Campbell** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    OCTOBER 08, 2012

Howard Gardner, the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the senior director of Harvard Project Zero. A MacArthur Fellow and the author of 28 books and several hundred articles, he is best known for his groundbreaking theory of multiple intelligences. He has recently talked about the emergence and transformative nature of digital media, and how the digital world can play to multiple intelligences. Last week, he spoke at “Shaping Our Digital World: You Have the Power,” a Common Sense Media/Good Play Project forum at Brookline High School.

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**“With smart devices, we can individualize education,” says Howard Gardner.**

Can you break down the theory of multiple intelligences for us?

Our language suggests that intelligence is a single thing, and that we can rank people on one scale — from smartest to dumbest. Research in recent decades suggests that human beings have a number of relatively independent abilities, which I call the ‘multiple intelligences.’ Johnny might be ‘smart’ with language and understanding other people, but not good in finding his way around an unfamiliar environment or solving mathematical problems. Sally might have the opposite profile of intelligences.

How does this impact how we engage with our digital world, our near constant engagement with computers and smart phones?

With smart devices, we can individualize education. We can present important concepts and train important skills in a number of ways, taking advantage of our multiple intelligences.

You maintain that the emergence of digital media has been as transformative as the invention of the printing press, a fundamental shift in the way the world works.

The printing press brought written material into the hands of everyone who could read, and it made knowledge accessible to the masses. The digital media present information of all sorts in a variety of symbolic modes — not just words but sounds, pictures, music. They allow instant transmission of content all over the world. And most important, they allow each of us to create content and share it with anyone else with access to a digital platform. It is as if everyone had a printing press and everyone could author books and share them with people across the globe. And also songs and photos and videos.

How does all this impact the way we process information?

Over time, individuals seem to be able to use multiple sources of information agilely, which is good, but may have less patience and less ability to go into things deeply and stay with them, which is not good.

And what about how this changes what we choose to remember, so-called ‘google memory’?

We no longer need to remember all sorts of things that people used to remember, from phone numbers to directions downtown. The information is in our smart phone. What we do need to remember is how to use these devices, where they are, what happens if they break down or are lost. The challenge is to figure out what is worth remembering and why. Having huge amounts of information available is a mixed blessing. We need to develop the synthesizing mind, which can evaluate the importance of information and put it together in ways that make sense and are memorable.

How has digital media shifted the way we form and maintain personal relationships?

It is easy to form relationships with all kinds of individuals, but more difficult to form deep long-term relationships with people. The difficulty for many people in having sensitive and difficult face-to-face conversations is worrisome. On the other hand, the digital media can be a godsend for people who might previously have been isolated.

How might this affect the development of our children?

I am not in favor of keeping children away from digital devices; they are part of life. But just as adults must know how to put the devices away, so that we can reflect, have face-to-face conversations, spend time on walks or on the ski slopes, puzzle through a difficult personal dilemma, we must help our children ‘put devices in their place.’ The best way to do this is to model this kind of restraint, even as we model ways in which ‘smart devices’ can be helpful. We also need to help children understand which parts of life can be ‘app-ed’ and which parts cannot. A college student once said to me, “Why go to school, when the answers to all questions are in my smart phone?” I replied, “Yes, except the important ones.”

*Karen Campbell can be reached at [karencampbell4@rcn.com](mailto:karencampbell4@rcn.com).*