

## SHARING HER STRATEGIES

Jennifer J. Liskow'02G\*  
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Photos by Jodie Andruskevich

When Diane Connell was teaching at Northeastern University in the 1980s, she paid attention to the fact that her students weren't consistently giving her excellent marks in their evaluations. "I wasn't reaching everyone, but I wanted to," she says. On a train between Boston and New York, she read the first edition of Howard Gardner's book on multiple intelligences and it clicked.

"I realized that we mostly use our brain's strengths," Connell says. "I was using my brain's strengths to teach: the verbal-linguistic and interpersonal intelligences. I was using a lot of lecture and discussion in my classes." She slowly realized that students with similar leaning styles rated her as an excellent instructor while those with more right-brain, visual-spatial strengths did not.

"Students with a strong kinesthetic, visual-spatial learning style probably weren't getting all of my messages," Connell says. She added more right-brain activities into her classes and her evaluations improved. By the time she left Northeastern in 1988, she had earned an Excellence in Teaching Award.

Connell says it dawned on her that she could teach students to do the same thing. By recognizing their own brain-based strengths and weaknesses, they could become more aware of how they were teaching and which students they were reaching—or not.



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—Diane Connell

“In today’s classrooms, we have such a broad spectrum of abilities,” Connell says. “Many students with special needs and gifted students are in the same classrooms with regular education students. It’s crucial for teachers to be able to connect with everyone on both academic and emotional levels.”

When Connell got a series of e-mails and phone calls last year asking her to present a workshop in Chile based on her book *Brain-Based Strategies to Reach Every Learner*, she hesitated to accept. But when Connell saw that the workshop goals and objectives closely aligned with those of the cognition class she was teaching at Rivier that semester, she changed her mind.

“I thought, I am supposed to do this,” Connell says. Macarena Perez, the woman behind the e-mails, belongs to a professional development organization committed to updating Chilean teachers. “When Macarena outlined what she wanted and I saw it was similar to the way I teach, I felt like it was a calling,” Connell explains. In 2003, Chilean law changed to guarantee all Chilean children 12 years of free, obligatory education—previously laws mandated only 8 years of schooling.

Connell agreed to travel to Santiago to present two full days of teacher workshops. “There was just one little problem—I don’t speak Spanish,” she says.

Perez assured Connell that wouldn’t be a problem. Again, Connell trusted her and set to work having handouts and PowerPoint slides translated. She also had to determine how to condense the concepts in her book to fit into a two-day workshop and how to best model the teaching strategies she was suggesting.

“I was trying to make sure the big ideas came through loud and clear. I was also trying to teach in the ways I suggest in the book—to have teachers discover their own brain-based learning style, then find out their students’ learning styles,” Connell says.

When Connell arrived in Chile in January, she knew she had made the right decision. For 2 days, she worked with 50 different teachers ranging from kindergarten to the college level. She divided the workshop into three presentations each day; while Connell had the English version of the slides on her laptop, the audience saw them in Spanish.

“A translator was in a booth at the back of the room—the audience had earphones, so they heard the translator. At the end of each session I’d put on headphones for Q and A,” Connell says. During some presentations, she grouped the teachers by grade level to have them design and present lessons based on what they had learned about emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences and other brain-based learning methods.

Connell says that some of the teachers had never used an overhead projector before, and many didn’t have internet access. “Some of the K-12 schools have no computers, or only one or two for the whole school,” she says. “There’s a significant technology gap.”

Still, Connell connected with the Chilean teachers. She brought questionnaires to see what multiple intelligences they had. She also brought a model brain with lights inside that show neural connections. “Each human brain has enough electricity to power a 25-watt bulb,” she says. “When we learn, we make new neural connections. The teachers in Chile loved the electronic brain—brain neurology was new to them, they were so excited to learn this.”

Connell has already made arrangements to return to Chile in January 2009 to repeat the workshop in Vina del Mar. She says teachers in Chile are often not recognized as professionals. Chile's new president, however, is working to improve the country's educational systems, including the perception of the nation's teachers.

"That's one of the reasons I want to go back—to try to make a difference," says Connell. "Things are evolving in Chile, it's a good place to try to make changes that will affect teachers and their students."

Connell's teaching career started with an attempt to make a difference for boys who had dropped out of school in Nashville, Tennessee. When she was 16, she began taking speed-reading lessons from Mrs. Dot Patton, one of the first special education teachers in Tennessee. Soon Mrs. Patton invited her to join a book group, then asked her to provide one-on-one reading tutoring to boys who had dropped out of school and had committed petty crimes. Connell saw that as their reading ability increased, the boys became less likely to commit crimes.

"Dot taught me to look into people at a deep level. I've been struck by how many students want both an emotional and academic connection with a teacher," says Connell. Her work helps ensure that students around the world will have teachers who understand how they learn and present lessons that help build lasting connections. Neural connections, of course, which can last a lifetime. ■

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\* **JENNIFER LISKOW** works as a Public Relations and Web Writer in the Office of Marketing and Communications and teaches in Rivier's Professional Communications program. Jenn earned her bachelor's in English and communications from Notre Dame College in Manchester, N.H. in 1996. In 2002, she completed her master's in writing and literature at Rivier. She began writing in junior high school; since then, she has had poems, short stories, features, and essays published. In her free time, Jenn enjoys practicing yoga, ten-pin bowling, and listening to live music with her husband, Tim.