

# How to Interest and Involve Students in the Past History With Activities Based on Multiple Intelligences

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Knowing about the far away past is something teenagers are not interested in. They prefer to deal with the present time, their present interactions, and their present life. When they study history of the past, they most often do it just to have good grades, not for a personal interest. But this condition can be changed, their interests can be enlarged, so as to include what happened centuries ago, and this can be done with educational proposals that appear to them fun, involving and different from the usual school routines. Over the years, the author has proposed several educational activities that captured the interest and motivated teenagers to put themselves in another time period and understand what happened. The following projects show not only how to make them curious about what happened in the far away past, but through that understanding, know more about themselves, to see themselves as individuals who are able to make a difference also in the present and future times.

*Keywords:* teenagers and the past, involve in the past history, through the past know who you are now

## Multiple Intelligences and Human Needs

One of the foundations of Howard Gardner's theory on multiple intelligences is that at school only linguistic and logical intelligences are assessed. A young person might have incredible skills/potentials in introspection, space orientation or relating to others in order to mediate possible conflicts, but these intelligences are not evaluated in the traditional educational process.

In *Intelligence Reframed*, Gardner (1999) is ironic about the theses of an influential Harvard psychologist, E. G. Boring, who, referring to IQ tests claimed that "Intelligence is what the tests test". Paraphrasing the quotation and adapting it to a school context, one might say that students are what the school standard assessment tests evaluate.

Teachers find more and more problematic to deal with the new generations, their need to socialize to the detriment of commitment to school studies. They find not easy to find appropriate strategies to solve the difficult situation.

More than 60 years ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow (Bishop, 2016) proposed a motivational model of human development based on a hierarchy of needs, a series of priorities that, starting with the satisfaction of the most primary needs move to eventually the satisfaction of higher needs.

At the base of his pyramid, there are the needs essential to survival; while moving forward we find the more immaterial needs. Among the most fundamental, i.e., those that have the utmost priority, are those of belonging,

such as being loved and love, be part of a group, cooperate, and participate. They are followed by those connected to esteem: be esteemed, respected, approved, recognized, etc.

The needs of self-actualization, that include succeeding at school, take place at the top of the pyramid, and therefore are not perceived with the same urgency and motivation of the previous ones. As a result, for a teenager school is most of all a place where they can socialize, be esteemed, and interact with their own peers.

Scarce motivation in many students is due to the fact they feel forced to renounce to their own individuality in order to conform to the standard processes of education. A. H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows how the most basic ones are those satisfying the need of belonging to a group and being appreciated. Only when they are satisfied, the needs to self-realization through success at school may be relevant to them.

### Short Fantastic Stories Set on an Archaeological Site

One activity proposed in order to feel interested and involved in the past, was to ask students to write a short story set in an archaeological site in the world. They had first to choose a site from any place in the world, then study the geography and history of the place, and then start writing a short story on an exploration of this archaeological site. They had initially to use the information that had collected in order to describe the place and its history. Then, they had to describe their exploration, and at the end, they had to introduce a fantastic element to explain what happened to them.

Each story had to be divided into three parts:

1. The exploration;
2. The discovery;
3. The unexpected.

In his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* an expert called Tzvetan Todorov (1975) offers the following definitions of fantastic fiction:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know ... there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions:

(a) either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are;

(b) or else the event has indeed taken place; it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.

In order to write a fantastic story, you need to fulfil two conditions:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described.

Second, possibly this hesitation may also be experienced by a character. In this case, the readers might, at some degree, identify themselves with the character.

Their story could have two possible developments: (a) the uncanny (strange and unlikely to happen); and (b) the marvellous.

1. In the uncanny story, events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing, or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar. The uncanny is an experience of limits.

2. In the fantastic, we find ourselves in the fantastic-marvellous, the class of narratives that are presented as fantastic and that end with an acceptance of the supernatural.

So, they had to choose between one of these two options:

- (a) develop your story within the limits of reason;
- (b) move into a world of fantasy that cannot be explained by reason.

Supported from the beginning to the end, they were able to write short stories full of archaeological and historical details, enjoy themselves, and involve the readers with realistic descriptions and suspense.

### **A Blog From the Middle Ages**

Role-playing and simulations allow students to step into the shoes of historical figures to experience events from different perspectives, fostering deeper understanding and empathy.

Another experience, the author proposed to students was to create an interactive Blog set in the Middle Ages. Instead of choosing as their character a famous person, one of those mentioned in the history books, they had to choose a common person, i.e., a farmer, an herbalist, a soldier, etc.

In this project, the aim of this approach is of having students actively involved in what they are studying. Instead of just reading and discussing about a historical period, or watching films about that age, after a preliminary study of the Middle Ages, this time they had to become medieval citizens, be in that apparently faraway place and time, and tell captivating stories about their fictional life in that period. Harnessing emotions proved to be a powerful tool in motivating students and nourishing their academic potential. It turns out that we learn better and more effectively when such emotions are stirred and encouraged and when we manage to spark our students' enthusiasm and curiosity.

Course books on history and literature should study the past and the legacies of the past in the present. Understanding the linkages between past and present is absolutely basic for a good understanding of the condition of being human. In fact, education should not "just" be concerned with teaching specific tasks, but it entails forming and informing the whole person, for and through the experience of living through time.

Students were introduced to the project starting from their own needs and experience. Step by step, they were acquainted to the world of the Middle Ages and their motivation to contribute to explore that far away historical age was activated through different preliminary activities. During the initial research stage, when they found lost in the mass of data, or in the writing stage, if they thought to be not creative enough to have original ideas about their own contribution, they were helped with guidelines to find their own way in the sea of information in the web and to discover in themselves the trigger that would be conducive to their original contribution.

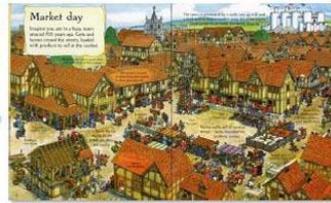
Students created their own historical persona, defined by name, location, and profession. They had first of all to choose a topic from a list given to them and then research general facts, so as to have a background and be informed on curious things about their topic. The initial difficulty was to be attributed to the adjustment of perspectives, due the difference between our time and the Middle Ages. Another initial stumbling block was the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of information at their hands.

Students had to write three different interactive posts, each one of who had to develop a particular theme connected to the profession they had chosen. In the first two posts, the bloggers focused primarily on talking about life in the Middle Ages (see Figure 1). For the last post, they had to find a way to connect their story to at

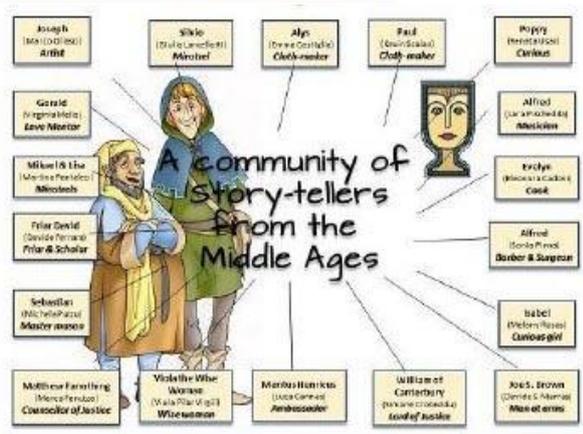
least another of the imaginary characters/bloggers. Somehow, this challenge inspired them in such a way as to entertain their readers less with historical facts and more with just their imagined stories. Fiction took over Facts.



Students not particularly motivated



A historical age to explore



## Students as story-tellers

Figure 1. Images that show the beginning and end of the experience.

At the end of the project, students found themselves part of a virtual community of fictional medieval characters, interacting with each other, and with a feeling of what it meant to be a woman or man living in the Middle Ages.

### Short Stories Based on a Painting

One way to make history relevant and engaging is to focus on individual stories, to humanize historical figures to help students relate to them and understand their motivations.

Umberto Eco (1979) wrote in *Lector in Fabula* about the interpretative cooperation between writer and reader and he stated that once a writer publishes a novel a reader is allowed to complete and interpret it according to his/her own personal experience. So, it becomes a collaborative creation. The same could be said about a painting; if you see something in it that the artist did not imagine at the time, it could be added to its value as a work of art that inspires reflection and change.

When we imagine something and write it down, paint it, or turn it into music, it will help us and others see the world differently.

In their initial plan, they had to confront with this task, and think in advance to the final reaction they intended to create in their readers. From their final feedback on their writing experience, it is evident they experienced a feeling of sharing with someone else a personal experience; it does not matter if it has the shape of an imaginary event. Somehow to be able to describe the evolution in the lives of their characters they had at a

certain level to be one with them, to instill in them their inner desires, drives, and dreams. Ultimately, their stories implied a transformation experience for their readers.

A reflection based on “What if?” is present in several of these short stories, when they try to offer a chance to female characters from the past who did not have one, not necessary a chance to fulfil their lives with an accomplishment, but also to be remembered as the male characters who lived the same events. Writing a short story is, in a way, like solving a problem. If you start from the end of your narrative, from the reaction you want to instill in the readers, in what might be considered as a top-down approach, then the whole activity could be considered as a problem solving one.

In problem-based learning, learners are engaged in solving complex, multifaceted real, or realistic problems that can be solved in different ways and may have more than one solution, and this is a way really to involve them. They need to identify what they know that applies to the situation, what else they need to know, and how they will acquire the necessary information that will enable them to reach what they feel which is the best conclusion. They should be involved intellectually, socially, and emotionally so that their learning feels authentic.

The first task will be to start and develop the observation skills (noticing), learning, and developing the language and the skills to describe what you see, selecting what is relevant, and giving priorities to some of the elements in a composition.

It will follow a reflection phase, when you are asked to interpret the data, you have gathered and arrive at some personal conclusions.

And finally, the interaction stage. Once, you have recreated in your mind the physical space and the particular atmosphere of a painting you have to imagine to be inside that situation, to feel something in connection to what is represented in the composition, to connect your own feelings and personality to the people represented in the canvas.

These teenagers who completed successfully the whole writing process can be taken as an example for many others. They took risks and pursued their dreams with their full heart and soul. They found their own voice in the narrative process, and as the collection of their short stories surely proves, they gave free rein to their imagination and inner soul to achieve what they had never thought be possible for them. Their experience as first-time writers could be called, in a way, pristine, innocent, as they were not concerned with publish contracts, keeping up with previous works, being different for its own sake, but just with expressing their dreams and letting themselves go, wherever their inspiration took them (Cuccu, 2020) (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Lamia and the soldier (John W. Waterhouse, 1905).

It was also an opportunity to care for others beyond ourselves, to show a possible future where some of the discriminations we suffer at the present are no longer there.

Imaginative fiction based on historical facts may be able to take up broken threads and tie them off, helping us understand the past and so also our present condition.

### **An Educational Booklet on Archaeology Based on Multiple Intelligences**

As a designer of Online Museums, I contributed to the creation of a booklet for the Necropolis of Montessu, in the island of Sardinia, Italy (Cuccu & AAVV, 2007).

This educational material is divided in two parts: In the first, an archaeologist answers some questions the author posed him about the specific site of the project. In the second part, he designed several interactive activities, based on multiple intelligences, on the knowledge of the far away past. Each activity is designed to put into play a particular intelligence. This booklet was designed in three different versions: one for students of elementary level, one for junior high school, and one for students of secondary schools. As we are going to see, this takes into account the fact that the same topic cannot always be presented in the same way to students of different ages, as their mind is still developing until the end of adolescence.

In the first section, the archaeologist answered the following questions (see Figure 3):



*Figure 3. A tomb in the Necropolis.*

1. What is the hypogeic necropolis of Montessu?
2. Why this particular necropolis is so important?
3. What used to happen in this necropolis?
4. What kind of relics were found and where are they now?
5. Which other kinds of constructions for the dead are present in the island of Sardinia?

In the second section, there was a list of activities that required an interaction of the student. Each one was related to a particular form of intelligence.

1. Language educational path:

The life of the primitive people according to how writers saw it.

Until the XIX century, the idea of a prehistoric man did not exist. That concept originated from the confluence of the geological discoveries with the evolutionist theory of Darwin, that gave life to the idea that there were progressive stages in the development of humankind. In 1861, Piere Boitard was the first one to write, inspired by the Darwin's theories, on the first forms of humanoids that appeared on the Earth. William Golding

published *The Inheritors* in 1955. This novel could be considered the first storytelling psychological in character about prehistory, as it does not focus only on the adventures of its characters, but it tries to show how our ancestors had a way of thinking different from the one of modern man.

At the end of the passage from *The Inheritors*, readers are asked some comprehension questions about what happens in the story and how they could interpret some elements present in it.

### 2. Musical educational path:

The rhyme of the historical periods.

In order to help readers remember the sequence of historical periods of prehistory, it was created a rhyme, to help them sing it and remember it.

Sono l'uomo primitivo,	I am the primitive man,
sono felice perchè son vivo;	I'm happy as I am alive;
io ho fatto mille progressi,	I'm made so much progress,
ti narrerò qualcuno di essi.	going to tell you about some of that.
Al tempo dei miei antenati	At the time of my forefathers
non era facile essere nati:	it was not easy to be born:
ora lo chiamano Paleolitico,	they call it <b>Paleolithic</b> ,
era un periodo davvero critico.	it was a really critical period.
Allora vivevano nelle grotte	We used to live in caves
faceva freddo, specie di notte,	it was cold, especially at night,
mangiavano la carne cruda	we used to eat raw meat
e, ti assicuro, era un po' dura.	and, I assure you, it was a bit too hard.
Poi all'improvviso scoprirono il fuoco	Then one day they discovered the fire
e c'era caldo: ti sembra poco?	And it was warm: isn't that enough?
Quindi nell'era del Neolitico	Then we moved to the <b>Neolithic age</b>
ormai il colore era già tipico.	Now colours were already characteristics.

### 3. Logical-experimental educational path:

How to preserve the organic findings.

Archaeology can offer the opportunity to apply scientific methods at practical situations, fostering your critical and logical abilities. Every archaeological site is conditioned by factors such as the ground and the climate. Some sites are to be found in warm and dry areas, others in areas that are very cold; some discoveries have taken place in humid caves or even under water. The presence of humidity or water creates a situation in which bacteria that decompose the vegetal matter do not have contact with oxygen. Relics buried in wet environments remain preserved until they are in contact with water. The experiment proposed helps to have a firsthand knowledge of what happens to vegetable matter in different conditions.

At the end of the introduction, readers are asked to make the following experiment: They have to put the same kind of fruit inside one of five containers, named, A, B, C, D, and E (see Figure 4).

The fruit in A should be put inside a plastic bag and then inside a freezer.

The one in B should be put inside a plastic bag and then let it rest outdoor, for example in a balcony or window.

The fruit in C should be put in a plastic bag containing some wet cotton, so as to create a humid environment, and then kept in an environment away from the light of the sun.

In D, the fruit should be immersed in water and then kept far away from the light of the sun.

In E, the fruit has to be covered completely with clay so as to be insulated from external air and then kept away from the light of the sun.



Figure 4. Different ways to keep vegetables for the experiment.

The results of this experiment would teach how to understand the condition of relics found in different natural environments.

#### 4. Intrapersonal-logical educational path:

Written in the bones.

Among the remains of the small necropolis of San Benedetto, near the town of Iglesias, in Sardinia, there have been found 35 corpses, male and female, of different ages. In addition to providing indication of parentage, physical aspect, age, sex, and causes of death, bones have also chemical elements in them that allow an archaeologist to find important elements about their nutrition habits, their typical illnesses and more in general their lives in their age.

As an interactive follow up, readers were invited to play the role of a palaeopathologist, matching the analysis of some human remains with a list of pathological conditions.

#### 5. Spatial-visual educational path:

The revival of the mother goddess archetype in modern art.

In different archaeological sites have been found female idols of Mother Goddess, the primordial divinity of the Great Mediterranean mother, nurturing and progenitor deity connected to the agricultural economy of the past. Next to them have been proposed reproduction of modern sculptures inspired on the theme of the Mother Goddess. Among them there are works of Moore and Picasso. It is a way to show how some myths or ideas of the past are still an influence in the present time.

#### 6. Naturalistic-logical educational path:

Classification of an artefact.

A young archaeologist has just found a decorated earthenware (see Figure 5). Once, she has cleaned, photographed, and mapped the discovery, she wants to classify the artefact. Readers are invited to help this young archaeologist find an answer to a list of questions she poses herself, in order to be able to classify it.



Figure 5. A young archaeologist at work.

The version of the booklet for the junior high school, instead of having the *logical-experimental activity*, has another one, a logical activity, called *The mystery of the three tombs*.

A young person after having visited the Necropolis, during the night she had a dream. In this dream, she imagined to have travelled back in the past and to be in front of three tombs there. She found to have three different objects in her hand: a little statue of Mother Goddess, a necklace of polished stones, and a polished bone comb. She knew that if she could match each object to its original tomb, she could be back to the present time. To help her, there are some steps to be completed, using her logical reasoning. In the booklet for the elementary school, instead of the *logical activity* it has a *Kinaesthetic one*. Readers have to complete the drawing of a Neolithic object connecting the single dots present on the page.

### **Educational Activities to Feel Involved in the World of Old Miners**

Stories from individuals and communities can provide a unique perspective on historical events. One example of this approach is the educational project for a museum that the author designed for an old mining site, Sa Marchesa, in the island of Sardinia (Cuccu & AAVV, 2006). This project was also divided in two sections: In the first, an expert in mining sites answered specific questions about the mines in the area. In the second one, the author created some interactive sections based on multiple intelligences. They are:

1. Logical educational path: The wage of a miner.

Miners were paid also in function of the quality of the ore that they dig. Women were paid less than men. They had to pay for the room they shared with three other workers. There was a special shop annexed to the mine where to buy the things they needed to prepare their meals. In some mines water was supplied only a few days a week and miners could use it only for drinking and cooking, never for washing. If somebody got sick, they did not receive a wage. If admitted to a hospital, the wage was cut in half, but half of it was taken by the hospital for the expenses. If a miner was 5/10 minutes late, the administration kept from the wage a quarter of the daily pay. At the end of the report, it was asked to do the maths on how much remained in the pocket of a miner after buying food, paying the rent, buying clothes, medicines, and new working tools if they got damaged.

2. Intrapersonal educational path: The doctor of the mine.

A doctor who works for the miners has been interviewed. He states that the most common illnesses in his mine are bronchial and pulmonary diseases. Sometimes, someone shows signs of having poisoned by lead poisoning.

The most common occupational disease is silicosis; it first affects the respiratory system, then and subsequently the heart. Another typical miner's disease is angioneurosis. It is an occupational disease due to trauma on the hands caused by prolonged use of compressed air machines.

Women working in sorting and washing, due to the continuous inhalation of lead and zinc dust, suffer from anaemia, menstrual disorders and irregularities and intoxication. Miscarriages and premature births also occur frequently.

He states that in the last two years, there have been 3,951 accidents, of which 120 caused permanent partial disability.

At the end of the interview, the readers are invited to express their opinion on some aspects of the life of a miner.

### 3. Linguistic educational path: The mine accident.

In this section, there are extracts from a novel that describes an incident in a mine. There are the points of view of four characters and the narrator of the story. Because of the need not to waste time letting gasses come out of some tunnels, miners were asked to go down anyway and do their job. There was an explosion and 43 miners died. In the final activity, readers are asked to express their opinion on the different ways the characters behaved before and after the explosion. There is also a reference to *A Modest Proposal*, by J. Swift. In this ironic work, aimed at denouncing the exploitation of Irish people by the English, he proposes to give children of one year old, belonging to poor families, as meat to eat for the rich English families.

### 4. Visual-spatial educational path: The style of the building of the mine.

In this other section, there is a description of the fact that the first mines in Sardinia were run by Belgian, French, and English companies. These companies introduced the Liberty style in the buildings they built for themselves and for the mines. At the end of the presentation, readers are asked to compare buildings present in the area, those created according to the liberty style, and the more traditional ones.

### 5. Introspective educational path: The descent into the mine.

This is the story of a new miner who for the first time descends into a mine, staying and working in the dark for many hours. He also describes the condition of women working outside the mine and of the children left alone for 12 hours every day. Those over 13 were engaged with women outside the mine, working with the ore extracted from the mines. The final activity asks reader to imagine them to be one of those children or workers who for the first time go down the mine (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Miners underground.

### 6. Naturalistic educational path: How to classify minerals.

This section shows how to classify the most common minerals found in the local mines. After their classification, it is presented the fact that they pollute the waters and the lands around the mines. In the following activity, readers are asked to propose ways to limit the damage created by the pollution of the water and lands.

### 7. Kinaesthetic educational path: One of the great inventions that took place in the Sardinian mines.

In this one, readers are asked to complete the drawing of a device invented for the local mines of Sardinia that was then exported all over the world. It is an auto shovel; it consists of a skip on which four small wheels are attached to a profile made of iron, such that the skip can tilt about 40° without reaching a height restriction. The opening of the shovel door occurs automatically due to the movement of the skip itself. The opening of the loader door is done automatically by the movement of the body itself. The outflow of the material takes place quickly without the development of dust, and the wheels remain away from the edge of the dump, preventing the wagon from falling.

### Conclusions

In previous works, the author described strategies that can be proposed to students in order to create the right atmosphere that allows teenagers to trust their teacher with their inner feelings and to expect to be supported, no matter what their choices could be.

Once, they see that their individuality is respected and supported, they can be ready to open up to new ideas, to new ways to learn, to share their ideas, and to progress.

One important element is to involve the interests of the teenagers in the learning process. For example, in *Short fantastic stories set on an archaeological site*, they could play with the element of fantastic, of the supernatural, that was so common in many novels and films they liked to read and see.

The decision on what kind of ending was to be chosen for their exploration was in their hands, and they enjoyed being the directors of their story.

History is often seen as something detached, far away, with no connection to our present times and condition. In *A blog from the Middle Ages*, teenagers that expected just the same thing to happen to them were surprised to moving through time in a world they had no idea before. They explored, and found a role that they could have played in that society, and enjoyed establishing themselves as interesting and valuable individuals. Their stories could not have taken place in a book of history, as we know them, as they deal only with major events, from the top down. There was a new movement in the study of history that proposed the study from the bottom of society to the top. Led by Lucien Febvre (1878-1956), who was a founding father of the Annales School, Febvre articulated the concept of “*histoire vue d’en bas et non d’en haut*” (history seen from below and not from above) in 1932. This emphasized the importance of understanding history from the perspective of ordinary individuals and everyday life. This experiment is in line with this trend of historians.

*Short stories based on a painting* involved different skills in the students, such as visual appreciation, problem solving, narrative skills, and background information skills. In order to tell a story about the characters depicted in a painting, they had to be one with them, to instill in them their inner desires, drives, and dreams, to put themselves in their shoes, to find in themselves something in common. This happens every time an artist, a musician, or an actor aims at interpreting a specific character. They have to ask themselves: What if I was that person in that situation and in that historical moment? How would I act, feel?

This process allowed some of them to retell the story from a new perspective, something that was not taken into account at that moment in time.

In the *interactive activities on archaeology based on multiple intelligences*, teenagers find themselves inside a new world, far away from their own, and they have to play with it, to solve problems based on what they see, to interpret the facts in their hands in order to find an answer.

This approach is now put into practice in some museums around the world, where you can choose to visit the expositions using an auditory path, a visual one, a logical one, a creative one, etc. The activities proposed can also be adapted according to the age of the visitors.

Finally, in the *activities proposed to feel involved in the world of old miners*, there is another example of how using multiple intelligences can help readers find different perspectives, some of which involve a personal involvement from the reader. The economic conditions of people living in the past are an important element, because they condition the choices and lives of people. When we use objects created from minerals excavated from mines, we have no idea of where they come from, and about the conditions of the human beings that have been working in those mines to extract the ore that is now in your hands as a finished tool, a useful object you use to make your life comfortable. Sometimes, whole families worked in the same mine, every day walking miles to reach it from their home, and trying to gather enough money to keep on living.

In conclusion, if teachers are able to establish with their students the right atmosphere, and if they have different teaching styles to take care of the different learning styles of their students, they have in front of themselves a chance to explore, to investigate, and to enjoy themselves and be creative, learning from themselves and from each one else involved in the experience. Teachers are not the only one who can teach something, teenagers, sometimes, and can show new ways and new ideas to their teachers.

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