

Six Elements That Help Create a Friendly Environment and Motivate Learning

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The following sections of this article are the background of the experiences described in the book *Creative Journals in a Bottle. Out-of-the-Box Activities That Help Teenagers Become Sensitive and Self-Confident Adults* (Cuccu, 2024). Being a teacher in a classroom of young people involves more than just being able to tell them about a topic they have to study, they are also educators and play an important role in their development in a critical period of their lives. The following sections deal with things to do and not to do in order to create an ideal environment characterized by empathy, motivation, and learning together.

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Non-verbal Management of the Classroom

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) asserts that there is a connection between neurological processes, language, and acquired behavioural patterns, and that these can be changed to achieve specific goals in life.

When I trained new teachers, I used as a starting point the techniques described in the book *ENVoY. A Personal Guide to Classroom Management* (Grider, 1993), by one of the founders of NLP, on how to achieve a non-verbal management of the classroom. Instead of raising your voice, moving your body, and remaining fixed behind your desk, these techniques show how to start the lesson, where to position your body, according to what you aim to achieve, how to use the volume and intonation of your voice to create the desired response in your students.

For example, when you want to start, instead of raising your voice and moving your hands to catch their attention, stay just steady, without moving, in front of the class. If some of them continue to talk, ask them to stay quiet, first with a loud voice that then becomes very low, so that to understand what you are saying they need to stop talking and listen.

If you have to explain a topic, choose the same corner of the room; if you have to complain about something, use a different corner. These routines help students understand what you are about to do, just from the use of your body.

If somebody is chatting with a desk mate while you are explaining something, just move next to them but continue to address the rest of the class with your lesson, letting the persons in question feel your presence close to them, even if you are not looking at them.

Swap Perspectives

Years ago, the author attended a seminar on mediation. The chairs where we sat were half on the left side and the other half on the right side of the conference room, with a large space in between. On the wall at the front centre there was something covered with a veil. The trainer told us that he was going to unveil a painting, and when asked, we had to describe it. He was sitting on the left side of the room, and he started asking us what we saw. Our comments were something like: “It’s an old lady ... Very ugly ... looks like a witch ...”

Then those on the other side of the room were asked to describe it. Their comments were something like this: “She is young and beautiful ... She has beautiful blue eyes ... Very charming lady ...”

Then, we were asked to stand up and move around the room. When I walked to the right side of the space, and looked again at the painting, I saw not an ugly old lady, but a beautiful young one.

The trainer explained to us that it was a two-layer photo, and each layer was visible only if seen at a certain angle of the light. It was a metaphor to explain the role of a mediator in a conflict.

The role of a mediator is to listen first separately to the point of view of each conflicting part, and then have them together and explain to them, using different words from those they tend to repeat when arguing, the reality of their condition and stressing on the things they have in common or agree upon.

The point of this story is that if we keep on stuck on only one perspective, we may become partial and lose the opportunity to see things from all sides.

For example, one thing that is stimulating, while a student is at the front of the class, presenting a topic, is to sit at his/her place and be one of them for a while. It’s also a sensorial experience, as you smell the air in the room from that chair, listen to how the sound of the voice arrives at your place, and feel your body against the chair the student has to sit for hours.

Cooperative Learning

Each student should feel, at times, to have an essential role in the whole learning process that is taking place in the class. One of the techniques that might help this is the so-called “Cooperative Learning”. It was developed initially in the U.S.A. at the beginning of the 20th century in evening schools for immigrants coming from different parts of the world. The general attitude of the participants was to make a separate group with the others from the same country: Greeks with Greeks, Italians with Italians, and so on. And so, teachers had to find ways to make them work together in mixed groups.

When students are told to work together for a specific task, it does not mean that they are working cooperatively. It often happens that they depend on those who show to be the leaders of the group, relying on what they say and following their ideas.

When organizing a group activity in a cooperative way, the first thing to do is to give different roles to each member of the group. Let us, for example, call the roles A, B, C, and D. Then, ask all those with Role A to sit at a table, and so on for the others roles. Then, support each group separately in order to assure that each one of them knows how to carry on the task given to them.

When the same task groups are ready, ask each student to join the initial group. Each of them has a specific task to achieve that requires the contribution of the expertise of each of their members. One student cannot complete the task without the information and ideas of each one of the others.

This methodology helps create acceptance of differences among students in order to achieve a big goal.

If possible, it would be motivating to introduce during the activity elements of entertainment and fun.

For example, prepare a WebQuest where you have selected some specific Web resources for the task and place leaflets in different parts of the school, and each one of them has a question to answer. To do that, they have to read with their cellular phones the QR-code printed on the paper to access the Webpage. On the leaflet there is also instruction on where to find the next leaflet and the question to be answered using the online material.

The author has seen groups of his students moving quickly around the school, trying to find the next sign and then to discuss together how to use the new information for their task, taking notes, and then running to the next stop. And they had fun, using their bodies, their cellular phones and listening to the ideas of the others.

If you do not give them fun, they will make their own. If you do not give them a sense of empowerment, they will assert themselves in their own way. And if you do not help them feel valued, they will opt out and form troublemaking splinter groups (Plevin, 2018).

Deal With Individual Students

When having to deal with problems created by a student, do not do it in the presence of the others. Take the person outside the classroom and talk to him/her not as a teacher, but as a human being, who understands some aspects of his/her behaviour as you had similar things when young.

Point out the positive side of the students, and be available in the future to support him/her if they need it. Also ask them to be in your shoes, and see how their behaviour is a problem for the others.

Humiliating children should shame them but for many it seems to fuel their fame and reputation. Heavy punishment may seem to crush behaviour in the short term, it may even remove the problem for the teacher temporarily, but it does not reach improved future behaviour to those who really need to learn it (Dix, 2017).

Increasingly, students seek attention at any expense. Attention, even if it is negative, is better than no attention at all. In the past, a teacher could manage with power to set parameters. But only if we stop executing from power and start building relationships based on influence can we begin to find ways to have the students both behave and learn. The traditional emphasis for teachers has always been on the verbal level. But the systematic use of non-verbal messages is the single most important skill that any professional uses.

Help Them With Their Individual Learning Styles and Use Different Teaching Styles to Satisfy Their Different Needs

When teaching a topic, the same main idea should be presented visually, auditorily and in a kinaesthetic way. Visually-oriented people need to see information in order to understand it. They like to get handouts and need to take notes, so that they can refer to them later. They may, however, have trouble remembering oral instructions. Visual learners learn best when they can see real-world examples, diagrams, idea maps, icons, pictures, and images of all kinds while they are learning.

Here are a few more things you can use to make learning more visual:

- (a) Picturesque language (metaphors and analogies);
- (b) Vivid presentation graphics;
- (c) Dramatic body language;
- (d) Vivid stories;
- (e) Mental imagery exercises.

Auditory people, on the other hand, process information by listening and prefer to concentrate on the voice and tonality of the speaker. They love discussions and remember details of what was discussed.

Kinaesthetically-oriented people understand information through their feelings and experiences. They need to try things out for themselves, and enjoy hands-on projects and tasks. They tend to use gestures and movements while speaking and may have trouble sitting still for too long a period of time.

According to NLP, when we receive for the first time an input, to understand it and store it in the working memory (short term memory) we use a representational system (visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic) that has been defined Primary Representation System. If we need to memorize the new information, it is necessary that we do consciously apply some effort to reach that objective.

The system of visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic channels that we use to let the new information settle in the long-term memory has been defined Secondary Representation System.

As strange as it may initially seem, the two systems do not coincide. As the data gathered is going to show, the predominance of a particular channel in the Primary Representation System pushes to compensate or reinforce the development of other ways of learning in the Secondary Representation System.

As a researcher, the author carried out for some years an analysis of the relationship between the way they study at home and their level of achievement at school (Cuccu, 2003). Here are two case studies that show the relevance of what has been stated above. The first showed top marks, and second very low ones.

Student A—School Achievement at the End of the Year: 10/10

Study method:

“I read aloud, memorize it and I repeat trying to do it in a clear and confident way; if I am not confident enough, I read it again and create in my memory a diagram that I use to repeat”.

Student A starts her process reading aloud (auditory), until she feels that the content of the text is settled in her. Then she repeats it in a clear and confident way, without reading from the textbook. Here we do not have only the auditory channel, as the modality is more complex. The way she does it implies that she repeats it and does it in a way that makes her feel ready to say it clearly and confidently in front of other people (kinaesthetic channel).

This powerful synergy between listening and feeling her own body in a state of particular ease is a powerful technique that the student has developed and that continues to re-propose in time as it gives positive results.

But what does she do when she does not feel sure enough? She visualizes in her mind (visual channel) a diagram that she creates from memory and then she repeats that using the same procedure described above.

From this case study, we can generalize as follows:

1. The synergy among the different channels yields good results. When one uses one or two channels and the desired results are not achieved, another system must be introduced.
2. It is not enough to repeat or read to acquire the information. If while we read we activate also sensations or visualize in our mind some diagram to be referred to, the process will be incredibly more effective and less boring and repetitive.

Student B—School Achievement at the End of the Year: 4/10

Study method:

“I read at least five times to understand, summarise the text, read and repeat, sometimes record it and listen again”.

Student B, who is endowed with high potentials in the secondary system (visual and auditory 86%; kinaesthetic 100%), stubbornly insists on reading the text in front of him several times, trying to achieve the miracle only because of his repetition of the words. When he speaks of reading to understand, since it is a foreign language of which he has very limited knowledge, both in lexical and syntactic terms, we have to see him trying to open doors to which he does not have all the keys.

For how can he expect to “understand” a text if he merely repeats it, without doing anything to understand the meaning of its individual parts? The channel this student uses exclusively is the auditory one. He does not create maps, his summarising is probably done orally, and he sometimes insists on this same channel by recording and listening to himself.

He does not refer to sensations or kinaesthetic manipulations of the text. Yet, the student in the classroom is extremely kinaesthetic, enjoys physical activities, and uses gestures a lot to express himself. But when he studies, he does not consciously make use of this potential. It is as if when he is studying he is a different person, forcing himself into behaviours and disciplines that he does not really feel are his own.

This shows that a teacher should help students find their own way to study, without giving for granted that they had already acquired the right methodology in the past.

Find Personal Interests and Use Them in Some Ways

Sometimes, use metaphors that involve elements of their own interests in order to convey ideas related to the topic of the lesson. To be able to do that, it is necessary to find ways and moments to share personal interests with them, and talk about yourselves, not as teacher and students.

For example, if you know that some of them have a strong interest in sports, one day when you are near the closing of a lesson, ask them to imagine they are playing a game against another team, and there are only five minutes left. If they score one single point, they will win, and otherwise they will remain without a winner. So, ask them to propose a way to solve the problem or the question you have posed them in order to end the topic, and listen to all their ideas without judging them. This is what should happen when introducing a project, you organize a brainstorming session, during which each of them proposes an idea and you just take note of them without judging the student. In the end the students will choose which ideas to follow, according to some criteria you propose.

These are just examples that point at the necessity in schools that students should not only receive; sometimes they could also give to others.

Conclusion

As teachers, we should not just behave as office employees, following routines and delivering what we are expected to the students in front of us. In our role, there is much more than that. We are responsible for the psychological development of the young people that have been assigned in our care. What we do and how we do it can create problems in them or help them feel motivated and empowered so as to have a future they like. We should not only offer them ideas, theories and tools, but also empathy, support, and understanding, so that in their journey towards adulthood they do not feel alone and abandoned to whatever happens to them.

All the activities proposed in the book *Creative Journals in a Bottle* show how we could adapt our teaching methodology, so as to take their needs into consideration and be more than just “teachers”, but also supporting friends and an inspiration for their own understanding of themselves.

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