



**Neeraja Raghavan**



# MY ROMAN HOLIDAY

July 2023

I want to share with you a few stories. Although it seems like ONE story – that of **my two-week visit to Rome in July 2023** – there are many little stories that are woven into this tale.

Would you like to read them?

## Once upon a time ... there was a terrible holocaust ...

After the second World War, an Israeli psychologist who was an educator began teaching children who had returned to Israel after the holocaust. He was himself a student of the famous Swiss educationist, [Jean Piaget](#). So teaching was something that came easily to Feuerstein.

But Feuerstein found that he had to repeat the same lesson everyday – for the children would quickly forget whatever they had learned the previous day.

In the night that intervened two day's lessons, their nightmarish memories of the holocaust would bring up all the trauma so vividly that the day's learning would be completely wiped out. Screaming with fear in the night, they would somehow drag themselves to class the next day, needing to be taught afresh again.

Feuerstein realised that he had to crack this problem. Here were deeply disturbed children. Their minds were not able to assimilate new learning.

[Don't we know that not everyone is lucky enough to be able to quickly absorb new learnings and retain them naturally?]

So he began to think: How can one identify deficiencies in cognition and then address them?

What if *thinking is a skill that can be taught*?

What is *intelligence*? Is it something that we are born with?

Can it be nurtured? Can it change at any age?

And Feuerstein was convinced that **intelligence is not a fixed quantity**. [Today, [neuroplasticity](#) has been confirmed through experimental evidence. But at that time, it was just Feuerstein's conviction.] He was so sure that **hard work can alter a person's intelligence, at any age**, that he set about trying to prove it. He developed methods of teaching children (and even adults who, for some reason, had impaired cognitive functions) *how to think*, and how to articulate their own thinking process: *metacognition*. This word: 'metacognition' has a very simple meaning: it means *thinking about thinking*.



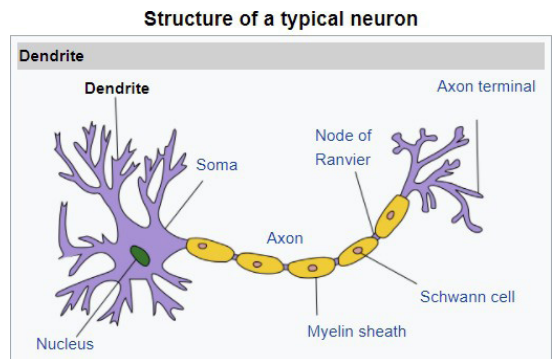
Feuerstein (1921-2014)



This brings us to the next story.

## ... The birth of a revolution in TEACHING THINKING ...

Well, to cut a long story short (you see, I have many stories to share with you!) he developed [the Feuerstein Method](#) that is a unique educational technique based on his theory of [Structural Cognitive Modifiability](#). That last phrase sounds more complicated than it is: it simply means that *thinking patterns can be changed in a very deep way*, so that they end up altering the brain's circuits. "Brain's circuits?" do you wonder? Oh, yes! You must have seen how a bulb lights up as soon as we turn the switch on. In the same way, we have nerve cells called **neurons** in our brains which are fired when we learn something new. And when they get fired, they send out tentacles called **dendrites**. The more the dendrites, the more learning pathways we have created for ourselves! So we literally have electric circuits defining our learning, all packed inside our brains!



Source: <https://alevelbiology.co.uk/notes/dendrites/>

The best part of Feuerstein's work is the eternal hope that it brings: to struggling students, despairing parents and frustrated teachers. No more doomsday pronouncements of "Your child is not up to the mark!" Instead, "Your child's intelligence is NOT FIXED. It can be made to grow at any age!" [And today, we know that dendrites can change even in the adult phases of our lives.]

Feuerstein's method changed people who were afflicted with Down's Syndrome so that they could be gainfully employed in the army. He ended up transforming the lives of thousands of people in his lifetime ... and hundreds of thousands continue to be transformed after his passing in 2014.

How inspiring is that!

A middle aged man lost his short term memory in an accident. Dr Jeanne Zehr of the [Mind Cap Center](#) transformed him in just two weeks: with her methods that were based on the Feuerstein method, she brought back his short term memory! *I learnt that one can nudge one's brain to form new circuits at any age.*

But how can we make this happen? You may well ask. The answer lies in the very important element called **MEDIATION** that the Feuerstein Method emphasises. Well, we all know who a teacher is. One who helps us learn, gives us access to new information, assesses our learning and writes out our reports (sigh!). But who is a **mediator**? A mediator doesn't simply teach a student. A mediator draws out the student's thinking in such a way that the student begins to feel empowered as (s)he discovers new ways of thinking deeply.

So let's move to the next story - of the mediator and the way (s)he impacts the brain.



## TEACHING THINKING – the mediated learning experience

The Feuerstein Method focuses on the FRONTAL LOBE of the brain. It starts with cognitive functions – not emotions. It employs what is known as the [Mediated Learning Experience \(MLE\)](#). Mediation is critical to effect changes in the mind of the learner.

Through mediation (which is different from classical Q&A teaching-learning), the learner's thinking is gently and consistently probed by the mediator. [See textbox alongside for a sample dialogue between the learner and the mediator.]

When – if ever – does a traditional teacher engage in this kind of probing of the student's thinking? Aren't teachers mostly hard pressed to 'cover the syllabus' and prepare students for the qualifying exams?

Here lies the heart of the beautiful Feuerstein method, and [the secret to transforming the way a learner thinks](#).

So what does all this have to do with my Roman holiday?

I went to Rome and met educators who were directly trained by Feuerstein and they had miraculous stories of transformation to recount.

Care to join me in Rome for the next story?

▶ “What do you see on this page? In the first box?”  
**gauging INPUT**

▶ “How do you know it is a square?”  
**gauging prior knowledge**

▶ “Can you find the square? The right angles?”  
**gauging internalisation**

▶ “Was it easy?” **Nurturing a feeling of competence**

▶ “What helped?” **Probing thinking**

▶ “Why do you think you made that mistake?”  
**Probing thinking**

▶ “How can you tell when you have made a mistake?” **Nurturing metacognition**

## SHORESH 2023

[The Feuerstein Institute](#) holds [courses](#) every year for those who wish to learn [the Feuerstein Method](#). This event was held in July 2023 in Rome, Italy.

[DLearners](#) enrolled me for two courses there, between 16th and 27th July 2023. Their intent was for me to absorb the fundamentals of the Feuerstein Method and then see how to infuse the ASKER THINKER program with new elements inspired by it. Which is why the first course that I attended was FIE Standard 1.



*Figure 1 With Dr Jeanne Zehr in Rome*



**FIE Standard 1:** The first course that I registered for was titled Feuerstein Instrumental Enrichment Standard 1. Feuerstein developed worksheets for changing the way learners think. He called these worksheets ‘instruments’. Being the rigorous and brilliant educator that he was, he developed 14 instruments for specific cognitive functions. In this course, we were introduced to four of them:

- ▶ Organisation of Dots
- ▶ Orientation in Space
- ▶ Comparisons
- ▶ Analytic Perception



**Figure 2** Cover Page of the first Instrument

See the picture on the cover page of the instrument in Fig 2? A boy in deep thought?

Well, so were we: in deep thought throughout the course, and in the picture shown in Figure 3. We were an international group of eight people: two from Romania, one from China, one from Israel, one from Brazil, one from Netherlands, one from Lithuania and I was the only Indian. Our course instructor Maria Louisa was Italian (top row, Extreme R in Fig 3.)

From the first day, it was a rich and meaningful experience. For the first time in my life, I was exposed to different ways of compelling the mind to think. And how was this done? A simple observation (but a very profound one indeed!) made by one of the course instructors sums it all up. (See textbox below.)

What a revolutionary idea! Acknowledging I DON'T KNOW opens the doorway to THINKING! How often do we feel safe and ready to announce: "I DON'T KNOW"? Why is it so rare? And if it is rare, is it any surprise at all that we don't churn out deep thinkers as often as we should? But HOW do we do this? Through the FIE worksheets!

“  
When do we think?  
We think when we DON'T KNOW!  
When we know, we DON'T NEED TO think!  
”



**Figure 3** Participants of the FIE Std I course with the Course Instructor Maria Louisa





According to Feuerstein, the most important thinking skill is that of comparison. Unless we can compare what is new with what we already know, learning cannot take place. So the Instrument called **Comparison** is critical to honing a learner's thinking skills. **Analytic perception** builds on this while **Orientation in Space** turned out to be so very important to an adult like myself: you see, I tend to get lost very easily, and not necessarily only in a new city like Rome! The reason is (and I discovered this afresh in Rome) that I never pay attention to road signs or turns. I was compelled to overcome this cognitive deficiency in Rome as I simply had to find my way daily from the metro station to the venue! It took me all of six days to crack this – but that is a story for another time! Suffice is to say that I no longer think of myself as “hopeless” at finding my way anywhere. Feuerstein gave me hope! This was a **practical experience** of this method working.

And there was another practical experience, too ...

## Intensive Mediation Seminar

I attended a second course titled **Intensive Mediation Seminar**, where we experienced the process of mediating a few specially-abled learners. I admired the courage of these children to permit a group of adults to watch as a mediator engaged with them. We were privileged to watch three different children being mediated by different mediators to work on **Orientation in Space**, as well as **Organisation of Dots**. We even took turns to mediate them ourselves. I personally could not see why these children were called dyslexic or deficit in attention, as their responses showed intelligence and enthusiasm.

“I want to get to the real stuff!” said a boy, when the mediator tried introducing him elaborately to the cover page of an instrument.

I saw the power of these instruments in compelling a student to think and also experienced the importance of good mediation to effect this in full. I learned so much that this blog is too short ... but my last story is a summary of my learnings.



*Figure 5 Experience of mediating a learner in the Intensive Mediation Seminar*

*Figure 6 Some of the course participants with the Course instructor*



# MY OVERALL LEARNINGS

---

- ▶ Until we drop “I know” and sit **comfortably** in the space that says “I DON’T know”, we cannot begin to think.
- ▶ A teacher teaches. A mediator *helps the learner think* and slowly turn into an *autonomous learner*.
- ▶ Unless the mediator works at *making the task meaningful to the learner*, the full benefit of FIE will not be reaped.
- ▶ Content is less important than process. A mediator’s task is to keep bringing the learner back to the *act of learning*, the wonderful voyage of *thinking things through*, without worrying about speed and being obsessed about getting the right answer.
- ▶ If the FIE *Organisation of Dots* is taken to be all about connecting dots, then the whole point has been lost!
- ▶ Examining the cause of an error is critical to articulating successful strategies.
- ▶ Merely transacting the content of each instrument is **not** the goal of the FIE. Each page offers opportunities to *draw out the learner’s strategies*, how the learner arrived at these strategies and *what made the learner err*.
- ▶ From strategies, the mediator has to lead the learner to explicitly articulate certain overarching principles that emerged from the above journey.
- ▶ These principles need to bridge the classroom learning with the outside world. Unless this is done, the learner will simply turn into a brilliant dot connector.
- ▶ My personally heart-warming and inspiring learning is this: if this 65-year-old lady could overcome her lifelong cognitive deficiency of a lack of orientation in space in **six days**, there is immense hope for everybody to overcome their unique cognitive deficiencies!

