AN INTRODUCTION TO SUGGESTOPAEDIA

In 1970 a book entitled "Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain" by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder was published and for the first time brought to the attention of the West the work of Dr. Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian medical doctor and director of the Institute of Suggestology in Sofia. Then, in 1971, in Sofia, Dr. Lozanov's thesis was published in book form. The thesis revealed practical aspects on how suggestion might be put in the classroom.

In 1978 Gordon and Breach published an official English translation of the Lozanov thesis: Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy. According to Jane Bancroft, the official translation followed the Bulgarian original, although some sections of the original were removed.

"Education is meaningless", says Lozanov, "if new skills are not memorized and made automatic so that they can be used as a basis for further study". Following the Soviet line, Lozanov says that hypermnesia or "supermemory" can be achieved by a suggestive setup or set, i.e., subsensory stimuli or signals directed towards the memory reserves of the unconscious.

But even the average individual can be trained to use more of his/her brain reserves and to give these unconscious capacities a conscious expression.

According to "Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy", the yogis needed hypermnesia to be able to preserve for future generations a given oral tradition. Among the Brahmins, for example, gifted children were subjected at an early age to a special kind of training which enabled them to develop their memory and to learn the vast body of ancient teachings by heart. Certain yogis had, as their sole occupation, the memorization of sacred writings so that, even if all the ancient books of India were destroyed and only one yogi remained alive, he would be able to restore the entire literature from memory.

While in India in 1967, Dr. Lozanov witnessed a demonstration by a Bombay yogi named Sha, a lawyer by profession, in which Sha gave evidence of his hypermnestic abilities

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regarding figures and objects. Sha's computer-like memory had been developed after three years of yoga exercises. Since, by definition, average students would not be able to spend three years on yoga before enrolling in, say, a foreign language course, Lozanov quite obviously gave serious thought (both before and after his visit to India) to which yoga exercises could be adapted for use in the

classroom so that the students could reproduce, but in somewhat modified form, the super-memory of Sha and others like him.

According to "Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy", the Savasana exercise, developed in any psychotherapeutical system, such as autogenic training, is of importance as a "starting point for discovering the possibilities of paraconscious mental activity." While in a state of relaxation, students are more suggestible and can receive information more readily - in the form of "suggestions" coming from the environment or from the teacher.

Dr. Lozanov puts forward the following definition of suggestion: "Suggestion is a constant communicative factor which chiefly through paraconscious mental activity can create conditions for tapping the functional reserve capacities of personality".

Dr. Lozanov says that the phenomenon of suggestion exists in a wide variety of areas. Suggestion is used, for example, in business, especially in advertising, to hit below the level of consciousness and to encourage consumers to buy goods without their being entirely aware of the reasons for which they are purchasing the articles in question. The suggestive power of religion, of religious institutions and leaders has been demonstrated throughout history and has been the theme of numerous books.

Suggestion, according to the Lozanov definition of subsensory stimuli directed toward the unconscious, has a place in the arts. Writers must capture the attention of their readers and actors must win over their audiences by appealing to the emotions.

According to Dr. Lozanov, spoken instructions (combined with the attitude, expectation and authority of the doctor) have a suggestive nature, by definition, and engage the unconscious mental activity of the patient. In so-called "placebo" therapy, the value of suggestion is all-important; what is decisive is the tone of voice and gestures the doctor

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uses in order to achieve the desired therapeutic effect. Experiments have shown that, in many cases, a placebo or medicine given to humor, rather than cure the patient has actually been effective in the treatment of certain psychosomatic diseases.

In teaching, it is well known that there are popular and/or well-respected instructors with whom it is easy to learn and who maintain discipline effortlessly.

According to the Lozanov thesis, it is obvious that there exist certain psychological or pedagogical techniques which are quite often unnoticed by the teachers themselves, but which nonetheless help them to attract and to keep the attention of their students. More generally, suggestions or subsensory signals, both positive and negative, constantly emanate from the physical and social environment in which we live, and these are often absorbed into the unconscious mind before being observed and/or analyzed by consciousness. Why do certain environments and certain individuals or groups have a depressing effect on us while others create a positive impression?

Lozanov claims that the subsensory stimuli or signals coming from the milieu or from a given individual or group may affect us more directly than phenomena perceived by the conscious mind. Such elements in the pedagogical process as the physical set-up of the classroom, the teacher's facial expression, tone of voice, attitude towards the students—all of which constitute signals directed toward the unconscious—may be more directly responsible for results achieved by the students than the actual logical presentation of the material taught.

According to Lozanov, subsensory reactions, if provoked by a specific system, can affect memorization irrespective of the fact that the persons under investigation are not aware of the existence of these reactions.

The aim of Suggestology is to investigate the weak, or unnoticed suggestions (or suggestive signals) which come from the physical and social environment and which are absorbed into the unconscious mind before receiving a conscious expression. The characteristic features of suggestive phenomena are directness, automation, speed, plasticity, precision and economy.

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The Lozanov thesis outlines three elements which prove the existence of the unconscious: unconscious mental activity during sleep (dreams, in particular); unconscious mental activity during hypnosis (age regression, for example); unconscious mental activity during a normal state of wakefulness (so-called extrasensory perception or the absorption of subliminal stimuli from the environment).

Unconscious mental activities during sleep are many and diverse. Scientists and artists (Lozanov mentions Mendeleyev and Coleridge, among others) have received creative inspiration for their work during sleep; modern psychotherapy and medicine use techniques of suggestion during sleep for the process of healing. The creative unconscious mental operations during sleep may take the "free" form of uncontrolled dreams or these processes may be controlled for healing or education.

Last, but not least suggestopedia is based on the power of suggestion in learning, the notion being that positive suggestion makes the learner more receptive and, in turn, stimulate learning. Dr. Lozanov holds that a relaxed but focused state is the optimum state for learning. In order to create this relaxed state in the learner and to promote positive suggestion, suggestopedia makes use of music, a comfortable and relaxing environment, and a relationship between the teacher and the student that is akin to the parent-child relationship. Music, in particular, is central to the approach.

From a somehow more practical perspective the prime objective of Suggestopedia is to tap into more of students' mental potential to learn, in order to accelerate the process by which they learn to understand and use the target language for communication. Four factors considered essential in this process were the provision of a relaxed and comfortable learning environment, the use of soft Baroque music to help increase alpha brain waves and decrease blood pressure and heart rate, "desuggestion" in terms of the psychological barriers learners place on their own learning potential, and "suggestibility" through the encouragement of learners assuming "child-like" and/or new roles and names in the target language.

There is no doubt that suggestopedia has raised some interesting questions in the areas of both learning and memory.

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