

# Penetrating learning barriers and the art of suggestion

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A crucial factor preventing students from tapping their full learning potential is their mind set, consisting of subconscious conditioned beliefs, attitudes and self-images. Teachers can learn to work consciously and purposefully to evoke positive responses at the subconscious level in their students, thereby allowing fuller learning potential to unfold. Several specific examples and strategies are discussed.

'n Beslissende faktor wat verhoed dat studente hulle volle leerpotensiaal benut, is geleë in 'n geestesgesteldheid wat bestaan uit gekondisioneerde gelowe, houdings en selfbeelde in die onderbewuste. Dosente kan leer om bewustelik en doelgerig positiewe reaksies in die onderbewuste van hulle studente op te roep om sodoende 'n groter leerpotensiaal te laat ontvou. Verskeie voorbeelde en strategieë word bespreek.

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Educators throughout the world face the challenge of assisting learners to transcend the obstacles which prevent them from realizing their true potential. This challenge is clearly an unusually formidable one for South Africa. Obstacles to learning come in many shapes and sizes, but they have certain common characteristics. Most important, both student and teacher share the unspoken belief and acknowledgement of the "difficulties" in learning as real, objective, and given. What many educators remain unaware of is that the teacher all too often communicates low expectations unconsciously through quite unintentional, non-verbal interactions with the student. However unwitting and unintended, as long as this collusion between student and teacher as to the "problematical" nature of education is allowed to prevail, the student is likely to continue fulfilling the hidden prophecy of less than hoped for outcomes, in which all participate.

Such ingrained beliefs operate powerfully in societies across the globe. Although the USA is a country constitutionally founded on the premise of equality for all its citizens, prejudices, racial and otherwise, continue to act as a major deterrent to the educational and social growth advancement of large segments of its society. In South Africa, inequalities operate not only *de facto*, as in the USA, but

are constitutionally established and officially supported. As a result, the challenge of liberating the potential of learners, both black and white, is nearly overwhelming. In my view, it would be naive to suppose that simply imparting new educational techniques and methodologies might succeed in meeting the South African educational problems. This paper does not presume to discuss South Africa's political alternatives, but it is my belief that political and educational decisions are inseparable. The ideas presented here presume a fundamental commitment to equality of opportunity for all persons. In the absence of such a commitment, strategies and techniques remain mechanical, devoid of the heart and strength of will which can empower such techniques and make them truly viable.

What can we do as teachers to end the long, ingrained tradition of severely limited expectations operating both inside and outside our students? The purpose of this article is to outline some strategies to meet this dilemma.

## The Pygmalion effect

Rosenthal's startling educational research over a decade ago still serves as a touchstone for raising teacher awareness concerning the determining im-

pact they as persons have on their students (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). Rosenthal sees the teacher-student dynamic mirrored in the myth of Pygmalion and speaks of teacher impact as the Pygmalion effect:

Pygmalion created Galatea out of ivory and desire. In Ovid's account, Pygmalion fell in love with his own sculpture of the perfect woman, and Venus, who spent a lot of time granting requests in those days, gave life to Galatea.

Most of us do not have Pygmalion's power to manufacture the ideal mate ... But we may have an extraordinary influence, of which we are often oblivious, on others. Psychologists have not yet learned how to produce Galatea or her male equivalent in the laboratory, but they have demonstrated that the power of expectation alone can influence the behavior of others. The phenomenon has come to be called self-fulfilling prophecy; people sometimes become what we prophesy for them (Rosenthal 1974).

The importance of Rosenthal's research results can scarcely be overestimated. He reports:

We selected an elementary school in a lower-class neighborhood and gave all of the children a nonverbal IQ test at the beginning of the school year. We disguised the test as one that would predict intellectual blooming. There were 18 classrooms in the school, three at each of the six grade levels. The three rooms for each grade consisted of children with above-average ability, average ability, and low ability.

After the test, we randomly chose 20 per cent of the children in each room, and labeled them intellectual bloomers. We then gave each teacher the names of these children, who, we explained, could be expected to show remarkable gains during the coming years on the basis of their test scores. *In fact, the difference between the experimental children and the control children was solely in the teacher's mind* (my emphasis).

We retested all the children eight months later. For the school as a whole, we found that the experimental children, those whose teachers had been led to expect "blooming", showed an excess in overall IQ gain of four points over the IQ gain of the control children. Their excess in gain was smaller in verbal ability, two points only, but substantially greater in reasoning where they gained seven points more than the controls. Moreover, *it made no difference whether the child was in the high ability or low ability classroom. The teachers' expectations benefited children at all levels* (my emphasis). The supposed bloomers blossomed, at least modestly (Rosenthal 1974).

The implications of Rosenthal's data are crucial for teachers. His work supports the central role given to the suggestive power of the teacher in the suggestive-accelerative learning models developed by Lozanov, Schuster, myself and others (Dhority 1984). From these experiments we see that the operating assumptions, beliefs, and opinions of the teacher can become a determining factor in student performance. A more pointed formulation: The attitude or inner mind-set which the teacher brings to her/his classroom will translate into student performance. This may sound encouraging for those of us who normally cultivate positive attitudes about our work. But it should be sobering to all of us to acknowledge the accompanying conclusion, that our inner uncertainties, biases, and negative thoughts, unconscious as they may be, work to inhibit our students, thus subverting our more conscious objectives. Thus, we ourselves may play a role in inhibiting our students.

Two personal experiences from my own classroom teaching may illustrate these subconscious forces in action. Ten years ago I was teaching German at the university level in much the same manner as I had experienced foreign language teaching myself. For example, I would exhort my students on the first day of class to work hard, master each step of the way, and to avoid falling behind. My inner operating assumption was based on our departmental statistics. I "knew" that more than 1/3 of the class would drop out by mid-semester, and that a significant number of those remaining would have little aptitude for languages and would barely keep up. Naturally, I concluded that these results, repeated

semester after semester, were due to the fact that too few students heeded my initial advice. As the years passed, I found that my enthusiasm for teaching language was steadily dropping, as were the numbers of students completing my German courses. Looking back, I see that although I had a reputation for being a good teacher, I communicated my scepticism and doubt as to any other classroom outcome in countless subliminal ways, through small signs of impatience, and through my voice intonation and facial expression. Students less likely to succeed would receive more critical looks from me than others I thought of as “good students”. At the time, of course, I was unaware that messages in *my* behaviour might be affecting the performance of my students.

Some years and much introspection later, I had the opportunity to study with Lozanov, the founder of Suggestology and Suggestopedia. His message was simple and powerful: What we communicate on the “second” or “paraconscious” plane of communication has a decisive effect on the outcome of the communicative process, echoing and extending the findings of Rosenthal. If the messages we are giving out subconsciously are congruent and aligned with our pedagogical purposes as teachers, our positive impact on students can be extraordinary. If, for instance, my non-verbal behaviours truly match my words of encouragement to my students, then such encouragement is likely to be trusted and responded to positively. If, however, I encourage a student to respond freely while at the same time greeting his incorrect attempts with furrowed brow, a critical mien, or impatient body posture, the message will be ambivalent and untrustworthy, and the student will respond to my negative message by inhibiting his future attempts.

An example from my classroom of how positive non-verbal behaviour can make a decisive difference is the case of Roger (not his real name), a student in an intensive German course I gave for the US Army Special Forces. Roger entered the class in the role of the “wise guy”, poking fun and acerbic criticism at everyone else. Roger asserted at the outset that he could not learn languages, that “book learning” was not his thing. The team sergeant, his supervisor and fellow members of the class, reinforced this by stressing that Roger was an excellent man in the field but not cut out for classroom work. Thus, I believed his distracting

behaviour reflected his attempt to mask his own fears and divert attention away from the learning challenge at hand, about which he felt very inadequate.

Before me stood a classic case of a belief/attitude system readying itself to become a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. My task was, in Lozanov’s terms, to de-suggest the negative set-up and to allow for a positive suggestive environment to take over instead. I assured Roger verbally that the learning approach we would be using would enable him to succeed. However, I was well aware that in all probability such a direct verbal suggestion would not be very effective, since the subconscious level controls and perpetrates the self-limiting messages directing much of our behaviour. To affect this level it would be necessary to speak at the subconscious as well as the conscious level.

I began this task by sitting down with myself. I envisioned Roger as the beautiful human being he is—apart from his behaviour which is often annoying and provocative. I imagined myself in dialogue with him in his essence as a human being, stepping away from my reactions to his class behaviour. I imagined myself affirming his rich capabilities waiting to be released from his impoverished self-image, the product of years of conditioning. I imagined myself trusting Roger’s capacity and his inner will to be more fully who he really was, if given favourable conditions. As a result, I resolved to be patient.

During the first third of the course Roger’s eyes were rarely available for contact, especially if I were looking for a volunteer or a sign of participating interest. I chose, however, to do what I had rarely done in previous years of traditional teaching: I chose to keep offering my invitation to Roger, day after day, even though his response remained minimal. In earlier years I would have silently contracted with this type of student in the backrow with downcast eyes. We would have both non-verbally agreed to leave each other alone. I would have turned my nourishing energy to those who were ready to give me responsiveness in return. With Roger, however, I remained alert to any opportunity to provide him with positive reinforcement, and I found that I never tired of confidently offering him new opportunities to step beyond his self-limiting beliefs. At times I did this verbally,

but more effectively, I am sure, were non-verbal cues, particularly facial expressions of interest, affirmation, and delight. I stayed alert for the opportunity to offer countless little responses which might give him the message that I liked him, that I believed in him, and that I was there to help him.

During the last third of the course Roger broke through his limitations. He began exclaiming: "I'm actually getting this!" From this point on, he became a willing, tireless volunteer. He finished the course with satisfactory albeit lower test scores than the others. The real learning accomplishment, however, was personal and lasting. Roger enrolled in another German course, then went on to a visit to relatives in Germany. He sought me out a year later, consenting to speak to me only in German. He spoke in a very adequate, functional German! With Roger, I sensed the importance of my choice to relate from the beginning with a persistently positive suggestive attitude. His performance in German might have confirmed what he believed he already "knew", that is, that he "couldn't learn languages". I knew better, and now, we both know.

Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message" becomes all the more significant for us teachers when we realize that *we are the medium* for what we teach. We cannot divorce our selves or our personalities from the material we teach, for, in reality, teaching can never be the objective presentation of an isolated body of material we often assume it to be. Teaching is a process of communication, and we as teachers, are the vehicles for this process. Indeed, we *embody* what is presented, giving both conscious and unconscious physical expression to what we teach. Thus, we offer our knowledge through many types of expression besides our words and materials. Even our most sublime abstract thoughts must take expression through our personal instrument. And each of us works with an expressive instrument which can and often does betray the attitudes and beliefs which we may have no conscious intention of communicating. Our students, however, are master decoders, as all humans are, and they read the totality of our signals quite unconsciously. Our students may not be completely aware of the effects we have upon them, but they respond to us decisively, nevertheless.

### **Practical strategies for embodying positive suggestion**

Whether we use the powerful medium of suggestion is not a choice we teachers have. We are employing suggestion all the time, whether we know it or not. The myriad of ways we use ourselves as transmitters for all kinds of messages, both positive and negative, is far too great to fully elaborate here. The important question is how can we learn to transmit the messages we really desire to convey to our students. What follows is a brief discussion of three sample strategies. The underlying purpose of these three ideas is to help teachers focus more easily on the subconscious level of their work in order to most powerfully effect meaningful changes in the classroom. Most of our behaviour is decisively influenced by the mind's subconsciously operating "programmes". When we consciously learn how to influence this subconscious level of response, we are influencing the roots of the brain's programme, allowing changes in the mental structures which, in turn, determine future behaviour. Each of these strategies can affect the teaching and learning process by using suggestive impact powerfully and positively:

- A Direct attention first to the essence of the message, secondarily on techniques employed.
- B Cultivate curiosity and acceptance between teacher and student rather than judgement.
- C Utilize the power of a freshly orchestrated physical setting.

### **Essence or technique?**

Most teachers seek a set of techniques that will work to make their students learn better. There is no lack of learning techniques being proposed today. Most of them prove to be very effective—in the hands of their originators. But why does the success of the originator meet obstacles in the transfer to the attempts of others? The answer lies frequently in the fact that the success of a technique may not lie simply in the technique, but rather in the full essence of the person who uses it. Even the best teachers often mistakenly attribute their successes to their techniques alone. Then, when they proceed to transfer their technique, they are surprised to find that the technique is somehow weaker in the hands of others.

Techniques are most valuable when they are congruently wedded to the person of the teacher and effectively bridged to the personalities of the students. Thus, one way to optimize our effectiveness as teachers is to cultivate our inner qualities as teachers and communicators. Thus, any technique we use will carry the essence, that is, the teacher-qualities with it. It may be helpful to think of ourselves as embodyers rather than executors of techniques. If we do not feel comfortable and "congruent" with what we are doing, then what we do becomes less likely to be successful. Some of the qualities we might wish to actively cultivate and learn how to express in the classroom are love of our subject, joy, curiosity, caring, and acceptance.

### **Cultivating curiosity and acceptance rather than judgement**

Teachers are often asked to evaluate their students. They are responsible for assessing what and how well students have learned. However, this role of the discriminating evaluator easily slips into that of the criticizing and judgemental authority figure. Indeed, most students project onto us as teachers their own expectations that we will be providing them with critical and judgemental feedback, for that is the quality they have most often experienced in their parents and teachers. We may find ourselves willingly or unwittingly accepting this mantle of power and authority offered to us. The temptation is great, but at the subconscious level the price is high.

Judgement and criticism and their allies, power and authoritarianism, are serious enemies to learning and teaching which fulfils the teacher and the student. From a psychological standpoint, criticism and judgement are bound up with fear reactions, and the brain perceives them as threats to one's safety and integrity. Such reactions are antagonistic to what Hart terms "brain-compatible" learning. Hart, in *Human Brain, Human Learning* (1983) argues persuasively for constructing a learning environment free of threat implications, thereby encouraging the brain to respond through productive risk-taking. He describes how the most highly developed mental abilities located in the cerebral cortex will be shut off under threat and fear in order that the more primitive, "reptilian" portion of our brain can take over to protect our

welfare with its fight/flight responses. Many students perceive classroom environments as unsafe places to take risks because of the constant fear of being "wrong", thus remaining cautious and guarded. When, as teachers, we perhaps unknowingly project a critical, judgemental attitude we reinforce a student's fears, mistrust and expectations, and thus inhibit functioning at higher levels of intelligence potential.

Acceptance of students *as they are*, on the other hand, can significantly transform the atmosphere of a classroom, creating a climate for "break-through" learning. Acceptance does not mean buying into a student's self-limiting belief system or self-image. Acceptance means meeting a student where he is without the judgement that he "should" somehow be different. Acceptance implies compassion and understanding. Acceptance evokes trust. In such a climate of safety, we can present an *invitation* rather than a demand to learn, grow, become more and more free, and an invitation is more likely to be accepted. We cannot *make* anyone learn. What we can do is to create a safe, rich learning environment and invite others to enter, and believe in the power of the seed to flower under such conditions.

Curiosity is a valuable quality, especially when coupled with acceptance, to create alternatives in situations often triggering negative judgements. Curiosity is dynamic, open, non-dogmatic, seeking. When we accept students just as they are *and* then, seek with quiet curiosity to discover ways to serve them in their learning process, they can respond with the motivation necessary to go beyond old limits.

A case in point is that of a young woman in one of my German classes who came to me after three days of class and told me that the course was a very stressful experience for her and that she did not know how to handle it. My first inner reaction was self-critical. How had I failed? I thought that in spite of my good intentions I must be creating a stressful environment for her. My own self-judgement contained a flip-side consisting of defensiveness and potential criticism of the young woman. Rather than fall into either interpretation, I chose to become curious about the nature of her own experience of the class. She then reported that she had just returned to school after working through a nervous breakdown and that the relaxed, invita-

tional atmosphere of the class was a hard adjustment for her. She had looked to the university setting for rigid structure and clearly defined limits, so that her fragile personality could feel order and security. She said she was afraid she might not be able to function well by relaxing and opening in the ways I was encouraging the class.

I observed that the young woman was experiencing a conflict between what she felt she needed and what she felt the class required. Thus, I invited her to take notice of all the structured aspects of the class, such as the request for punctuality, regular attendance, participation, etc., and encouraged her to use the class in as demanding a way as might be helpful to her. I told her that there was no "relaxation requirement", that she could be as "serious" about the course as she felt she needed to be.

In this case, a simple curiosity had led me to a better understanding and acceptance of her need. For her part, once she felt that her need had been acknowledged and accepted, she proceeded to embrace the experience of the course more fully than I could have imagined. Acceptance of her as she was took not only the verbal form cited, but numerous other, mostly non-verbal signals as well, e.g. smiles of encouragement and understanding, expressions of delight at her comprehension, production, etc. She finished with great success and wrote on her evaluation that the class had been one of the most important learning experiences of her life.

#### **The suggestive power of the physical environment: unsettling the set**

In the minds of many the suggestive-accelerative learning model is associated with Lozanov's Suggestopedia with its comfortable reclining chairs, carefully and aesthetically arranged instructional room and specially integrated music. Many teachers turn away from Suggestopedia because, concluding that it seems to require an elaborate physical set-up, they cannot conceive of how it could be realized in their teaching settings with space, budget, and long-established organizational constraints. However, if we heed the powerful principles which underlie a suggestopedic environment, we can speculate that the magic does not lie in the comfortable chairs, the art reproductions, or in a Mozart piano concerto. The magic lies in the sug-

gestive psychological interaction between the students' inner mind-set and the entire external physical set-up. Thus, without miraculous changes in our institutions all of us can actually make effective modifications in our teaching environments.

The purpose of carefully orchestrating the physical environment is twofold. First, we can, by using comfortable chairs, proper lighting and appropriate music, facilitate the creation of a relaxed instructional setting. This aspect of the physical environment has been discussed at length by myself (Dhority 1984).

The second, related purpose of consciously orchestrating the instructional setting is to affect the student's subconscious mind-set. Lozanov characterizes his model as a de-suggestive/suggestive process. We might more easily understand "de-suggestive" as a type of de-conditioning or desensitization. Our students come to us highly conditioned by their past learning experiences in school. Often their self-images are fixed, as are their expectations and images of learning, teaching, teachers, school, languages, maths, etc. Since we in the teaching role may have very different images and expectations of the learning process, our expectations and beliefs will necessarily bump up against the inner mind-set of our students. An important question is: What would make a student change his limiting inner image/attitude about learning into one which would serve him better? The words we use might be only partially effective. Because students have spent many of their school years being constantly barraged by words, their defences against conscious, direct verbal suggestion are quite well-developed. Students are accustomed to new sets of verbal requirements associated with moves from one teacher to another. They vary their behaviour as necessary to satisfy the variations on the theme of teacher/school. Thus, the inner mind-set consisting of sub-conscious, programmed attitudes remains largely unchallenged.

Altering the physical environment can be an attractive and effective strategy for penetrating the inner mind-set of the student, allowing us to work at both the de-suggestive and suggestive levels. The inner mind-set is based on and thrives on redundancy, and sameness is a hallmark of the physical setting of most educational institutions. Our students have usually seen tens if not hundreds of look-alike

classrooms before they enter our class. Their expectations are generally set and are normally confirmed upon entering a room. The chairs are of a certain familiar type, placed in a certain arrangement, and the bare walls, the blackboard, the teacher's lectern confirm the established, accepted picture. Before we even open our mouths on the first day to utter our first words, the student's conditioned attitude about school and this class have been quietly reinforced.

If our objective is to help a student break through his subconscious attitudes so that he can tap his greater potential, then the last thing we want is to confirm past experiences and attitudes. Ideally, when our students first walk into our classroom, fresh expectations should be evoked. In some way, perhaps different for every teacher, students should be taken a little by surprise. The tentative openness in their surprise provides us with a valuable opportunity. We can then enter with freshly orchestrated input, designed to bypass the old programmes, awakening students to new possibilities.

A case in point is my own "Experiencing German", an intensive beginning language course at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. On the first day of class I have carefully prepared the very ordinary room in advance: fresh cut flowers on the table, an oval rug on the floor, blue and green colour inserts to mute the fluorescent light panels, colourful posters depicting attractive scenes from Germany, Austria and Switzerland as well as posters with verbal suggestions such as **play**, **relax** and German phrases to be used in the hours to come, comfortable chairs with arms and headrests arranged in a half-circle, easels with pads and colour markers instead of blackboards, and a stereo music system playing a Mozart Divertimento in the background. I asked students to wait in a small anteroom until I ask them to enter the classroom. There they may have coffee, tea, and hot chocolate. This is the stage set for the crucial first day of class.

At 09h00 sharp, when the three-hour class is scheduled to begin, I open the door and invite the students to come in, greeting each one with a smile and eye contact. As may be imagined, this is like no other class they have ever begun. Their faces betray surprise, wonder, expectancy, curiosity, pleasure, delight—and in the case of some, a hint of

scepticism or suspicion behind their wait-and-see expression. Nowhere do I see an expression of comfortably settling into a "known" or familiar environment. I believe the environment I am creating is rich with non-verbal, positive suggestions with the potential of evoking a high level of expectancy. (For a detailed description of first day teacher behaviour and techniques, see Dhority 1984.) The unexpected physical set-up has caught the students off-guard. A fresh space has been created, unfilled by old associations, without confirming old biases. The rigidity of mind-set patterns is suspended for a moment. Something new, fresh, possible can be entertained without the weight of the past, the "known", interfering to its usual degree. They have unsettled the "set". This can be thought of as preparing the ground for seeding breakthrough attitudes through the positive, suggestive strategies, both verbal and non-verbal which will follow in the hours to come (Dhority 1984).

Altering the physical environment to the degree described above is not necessary in order to make numerous significant "unsettling", positive changes just discussed. We can bring in music—with our own portable cassette players, if need be. Suppose we share the room with other teachers and courses, we can perhaps store some environmental supports in a corner cabinet or box. Items such as a colourful cloth to cover the teacher's table, posters and pins, a small rug to unroll, a floor lamp—how little it actually takes to bring an appreciated touch of life into the moribund sameness of most institutions. Obviously, the more one can do, the better. Yet we all can do something. And the effort is worth it. These seemingly gratuitous, aesthetic touches can have significant impact on achievement of our instructional goals.

Thus, there are simple but significant possibilities for opening student potential through the all-important vehicle for learning, the student-teacher relationship. The student remains dependent upon the teacher to make the first move in breaking the limits of the prevailing mind-set. The teacher can greatly enhance his/her suggestive power in the classroom as more attention is given to embodiment and essence, to acceptance and curiosity, and to conscious orchestration of many unspoken elements affecting the student at the unconscious level.

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*Clear arrangement. (Lucido ordo.)*

– Horace

*The only things in life in which we can be said to have any property, are our actions.*

– C. C. Colton