

Sukhomlinsky News

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Welcome to new subscribers!

I would like to give a warm welcome to new subscribers who are receiving this newsletter for the first time. This is the 22nd issue of the newsletter, and all past newsletters are available for download at:

<http://theholisticeducator.com/sukhomlinsky/newsletter/>

This month I am continuing the translation of Sukhomlinsky's book '100 Pieces of Advice for Teachers'. This week's chapters focus on approaches to the introduction of new material during lessons. The children's stories this week have a focus on caring for the natural environment.

During the past month I have transferred several foreign language editions of 'A World of Beauty' from the Createspace print-on-demand platform, to the Ingram Spark platform. I am still waiting to see the results, but will include more information about the changes in the next newsletter.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Advice for Teachers (continued)

The fourteenth and fifteenth chapters in Sukhomlinsky's collection of advice for young teachers emphasise the importance of giving students time to make sense of new material during a lesson. While the examples offered relate mainly to high school, the underlying principles are applicable to primary schools.

14. Introducing new material

One of the root causes of students' difficulties is inadequate study of new material. What do I mean by the study of new material, and is that terminology appropriate? I think it is appropriate. Knowledge undergoes a continuous process of development. The study of material continues for a long time, and each application of knowledge is at the same time a development and a deepening of that knowledge. The first acquaintance with new material is the first significant step from ignorance to knowledge, to an understanding of the essence of facts, phenomena, qualities and attributes.

For example, students will have to work with polynomial identities for many lessons. Experience shows that a great deal depends on how deeply a student understands a formula at the first lesson at which it is introduced, including whether they will be able to use it to acquire new knowledge. In other words, the student's level of understanding of the new formula will determine whether they are ready for the next introduction of new material. This leads us to another important principle. [Continued on page 2.]

Introducing new material (continued)

The fewer unclear, hazy, superficial notions students have, the lighter will be the burden on their shoulders, the less they will fall behind, the more their thought processes will be prepared for the introduction of new material, and the more effective their work during lessons will be.

Lessons during which new material is presented have to be special lessons, in the sense that they require a special clarity, and students' independent work takes on a special significance. Try to ensure that you monitor the results of every single student's intellectual work when studying new material. When studying new material it is exceptionally important to observe the independent work of the 'slower' students: those who think slowly and are slow on the uptake, who need more examples and more time to make sense of the material (and who often require different examples to most of the other students).

Experienced teachers always check to see how students have completed independent work at lessons where new material is introduced. Such lessons must include independent work that includes making sense of the facts and a process of induction from the facts to a generalised truth. (I am referring especially to lessons in the natural sciences, mathematics and grammar.)

It is very important that in making sense of the facts there is some application of the knowledge acquired. Here again special attention must be given to the 'slower' students. The difficulties experienced by each individual student must be appreciated, and each must be given an appropriate task to complete. Sometimes it becomes apparent during a lesson that an individual homework assignment needs to be given to one student or another. An experienced teacher will usually do that immediately during the lesson. For students who strug-

gle, success depends a great deal on how regularly and systematically they work on new material during lessons. They must not be allowed merely to listen to the correct answers of other students and copy material from the board. They must be required to think independently, and encouraged—patiently and tactfully—to achieve at least some degree of success in their intellectual work at every lesson.

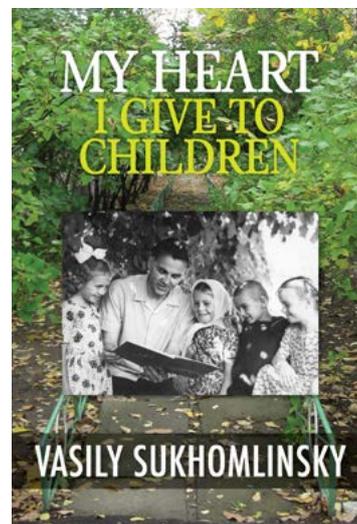
When teaching grammar I always tried to ensure that at the very first lesson when new material was introduced, and during the period immediately after, students did not make any mistakes in their written work. It may sound paradoxical, but it is true: students will become literate when they do not make any mistakes during lessons. If they do not make any mistakes during lessons, they will not make them when completing homework, or they will make very few. One of the main reasons for the difficulties experienced by language teachers is that students make mistakes in their written work during lessons. The teacher's error is in not setting the goal of having no mistakes during the lesson.

How can we practically achieve the goal of writing without errors, and thus lay a firm foundation for knowledge? This depends on many factors, and perhaps most importantly on a student's ability to read fluently. In order to write without errors a student must be able to read fluently. There are also other determining factors, including the structure of the lesson and the methods and types of work conducted. When preparing for a grammar lesson, I tried to foresee which words students might have difficulty with, and who among the students would need help. Not a single 'tricky' word went without a preparatory explanation.

My advice when introducing new material is to avoid superficial understanding of facts, phenomena

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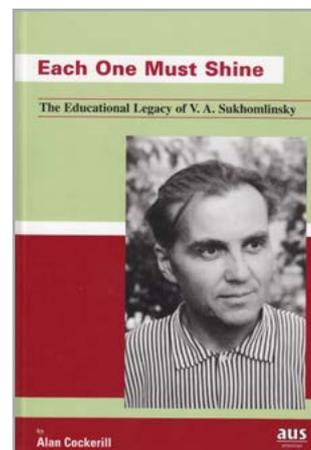
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and rules, so that students will not make mistakes the first time you introduce a new grammatical rule or mathematical formula.

15. Making sense of new material as a stage in a lesson

Probably every teacher has experienced this. At yesterday's lesson everyone understood the rule (definition, law, formula). Everyone answered well and gave examples. But today half the class has only a hazy understanding of what was studied, and some have completely forgotten it. Many of the students have had great difficulty completing the homework task. During yesterday's lesson none of these difficulties were apparent. To understand is not the same as to know. Understanding is not yet knowledge. In order to acquire firm knowledge, we have to make sense of it.

What do I mean by 'make sense'? I mean that the students think about what they have apprehended, checking whether they have understood it correctly, and try to apply the acquired knowledge in practice.

I will give an example. At a geometry lesson students are introduced to the notion of trigonometric functions. The teacher presents definitions of two functions: sine and cosine. The material does not present any difficulty, and it appears as if everything has been understood. But just because something has been understood, does not mean it has been mastered. After the explanation, time is devoted to thinking about the new material. The students open their exercise books and draw right-angled triangles, writing down the teacher's explanations, repeating the definitions of sine and cosine, and demonstrating the functions with their own examples. Here the students are combining revision of the knowledge with its first, elementary application. It turns out that when they check their work, many students are unable to reproduce the explanations of the concepts.

Realising that they have forgotten some link in the explanation, the students refer to the textbook, but only after making an effort to remember it themselves.

This stage of making sense of new material is especially important for those 'weaker' students who struggle. Experienced teachers give a great deal of attention to helping these struggling students to focus their attention on those 'points' that represent the cause and effect relationships, the basis of knowledge. Many years of experience have convinced me that the reason some students have difficulty retaining knowledge is that they do not see or understand the interconnections between facts, phenomena and laws, those 'points' where cause and effect relationships are manifested, whether they be temporal, functional or of some other nature. It is to these 'points' that we need to direct the attention of students who struggle.

Suppose you are explaining verbal adverb phrases to your students. The elusive 'point' in this case is that a verbal adverb functions like a secondary predicate to the main predicate—the verb. Having given the students time to make sense of the new material, I direct the attention of a student who is struggling to the fact that when he is composing a sentence containing a verbal adverb phrase, he must imagine two actions: a main, primary action, and another, dependent, secondary action. The student thinks about some real actions and then composes a sentence. However theoretical the material studied during the lesson may be, it is always possible to find some practical work to help make sense of it. At history and literature lessons, making sense of new material usually involves seeking meaningful cause and effect relationships in the material that has just been introduced. For example the teacher may have just told the students about the liberation of Russian peasants from serfdom in 1861. To make sense of this ma-

terial, five to seven minutes are allocated to respond to the following questions. What path would the development of agriculture have taken in Russia if the imperial government had not liberated the serfs? What relationship existed between the development of capitalism in Russian agriculture and in industry before 1861, and how did that relationship change after the liberation of the serfs? What reasons were there for the persistence of feudal elements in Russian agriculture even after the reforms of 1861? These questions are written on a large sheet of paper that is posted on the blackboard immediately following the teacher's exposition of the subject. This marks the beginning of one of the most intense and interesting parts of the lesson. The students recall material studied during earlier lessons and 'dig' into the textbook (incidentally the textbook is required in humanities subjects mainly in order to make sense of new material). What takes place is in my opinion the most essential and useful of learning processes: the revision of material studied earlier without reading the whole textbook from beginning to end. Such revision is the most effective, because it is driven by thought.

So do not be afraid of allocating as much time as possible to mastering new material. The more effective intellectual work is when making sense of knowledge, the less time a student will need to spend completing homework assignments, the less time you will need to check homework during the next lesson, and the more time you will have to explain new material. Understand this key interrelationship and you will break the vicious circle. You do not have enough time to introduce new material properly because you spend so much time checking homework, and checking homework takes so long because the material was not adequately studied in the first place.

Stories for Children

A stone

In a clearing under a spreading oak tree lived a well. For many years it gave water to people. Travellers liked to rest under the oak tree next to the well.

One day a boy came to the oak tree. "I wonder what will happen if I throw a stone into the well? It will probably make a big splash," thought the boy, and he picked up a large stone and threw it into the well.

There was a loud splash. The boy laughed, ran away and soon forgot about his prank.

The stone fell to the bottom of the well and blocked the spring that fed it. Water stopped flowing into the well, and it dried up. The grass in the clearing died and the oak tree died, because the underground water now took a different path. The nightingale stopped nesting in the oak tree, and its singing could no longer be heard. The meadow became a sad and empty place.

Many years passed. The boy grew up, became a father, and then a grandfather.

One day he came to where the green clearing had been, where the leaves of the spreading oak tree had rustled, and travellers had come to drink the pure water from the well.

There was no clearing, no oak tree and no well. There was just yellow sand, and clouds of dust were scattered by the wind.

"Where did it all go?" wondered the grandfather.

The lamplighter

Through green meadows and thick forests a river flowed. It was deep and free flowing, but quiet and gentle. For many centuries it had carried its pure water. Boats and even small ships sailed on that river.

On the shore of the river lived an old lamplighter. Every evening he climbed into his boat, rowed to the middle of the river and lit a lamp. Its light flickered in the middle of the river until dawn, showing the way to travellers. Waves tenderly splashed on the shore. The river was glad: people loved her, and she felt needed by them.

But people needed lots of wood to make tables and chairs, and they cut down the forests by the shores of the river. It seemed to people that the green meadows were an

unnecessary luxury, and they ploughed them to grow crops.

The cold springs that fed the river dried up, and the river itself choked with thirst and died. For a few years, where the boats and ships had sailed, a stream babbled in spring, and then it too dried up. The old river bed became used for vegetable gardens. The only reminder of the river that had flowed there was the post where the lamplighter hung his lamp each spring, as he was accustomed to doing.

But the rain clouds gathered less and less often overhead. Hot winds blew in from the desert and knocked at people's doors.

As soon as dusk fell, the old lamplighter walked through the fields, lit his lamp and hung it on the post. A little boy named Seryozha asked him one day:

'Grandpa, why do you still light your lamp? There has not been any river here for a long time.'

'So people can more easily see their stupidity.'

The swing behind the fence

This happened in a town near here. In one large apartment block there were forty apartments. A boy and a girl played in the large courtyard. Each had their own toys.

Nina had a large ball, half red and half blue.

One day the boy took Nina's ball to play with, and Nina ran to her father in tears. Her father came and took the ball away from the boy and said to Nina:

'Don't give your toys to anyone. I will build you a swing.'

The father built Nina a swing. So no-one else could play on it, he built a tall fence around it. Nina would come and unlock the gate and swing all by herself, while the other children watched enviously.

However, Nina got sick of swinging by herself, and wanted to play with the other children. She went out to be with them, but they did not accept her into their group. They said: 'Go and play on your swing. Leave us alone.' Nina went to her father, snivelling, and told him that the children had chased her away. Her father sat by the window and looked at the swing behind the fence, while Nina waited to see what her father would say.