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Sukhomlinsky News

My heart I give to children

Vasily Sukhomlinsky is a paragon of teaching theory and practice throughout Eurasia. SETH UNMACK explores his life and his legacy.

Preschool students' education was conducted outdoors ... as explorers in a dilapidated hut, lighting campfires in caves or taking boat trips on a nearby river.

Education for the Anthopocene

Last year I wrote an article about Sukhomlinsky entitled 'Education for the Anthropocene'. It is due to be published later this year.
The Anthropocene is the name coined for the latest geological age, when the shape of the earth's surface is being determined by human activity, and the fate of all other species hinges on human choices.
All of Sukhomlinsky's work is imbued with an appreciation for the beauty of nature and a sense of human responsibility for the future of the planet and the lives of future generations. I think it is fair to characterise his work as an attempt to develop a system of education for the Anthropocene. With the effects of global warming becoming ever more evident, and political and economic systems under pressure from within and without, it is timely to reflect on the type of education that is required to meet the challenges of the future.

Best wishes,

Alan Cockerill

Article published in *AEU News*

A new article about Sukhomlinsky, written by Seth Unmack and entitled 'My heart I give to children', has been published in *AEU News*.

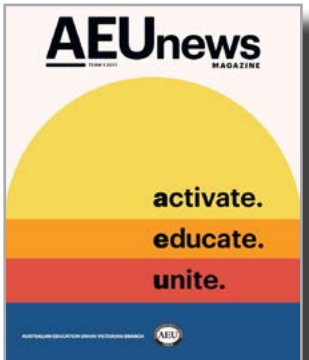
The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union produces a journal entitled ***AEU News***. The journal is distributed to 50,000 union members throughout Victoria. This year the editors are introducing a new quarterly format, aimed at providing 'a rich source of informative, inspiring and thought-provoking content'.
The first issue for this year contains an article about Sukhomlinsky that has been carefully researched by Seth Unmack. Unmack suggests that Sukhomlinsky's holistic approach contrasts with the current political and educational climate. He writes:

'Sukhomlinsky was a teacher and philosopher ahead of his time. His commitment to his students' intellectual, physical and spiritual development constrasts sharply with modern-day realities of NAPLAN results, PISA scores and TIMSS rankings. Most importantly, he taught with love, and he sought to inspire a love of learning amongst his students.'

The full text of the article can be viewed at:

http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/news-media/aeu-news-magazine

To read the article, click in the middle of the viewing screen to activate 'Fullscreen', and then use the arrows to navigate to pages 20 and 21.



From facts to generalisations

The thirteenth chapter in Sukhomlinsky's collection of advice for young teachers suggests that memorisation should be based on understanding if it is to lead to knowledge that can be applied.

13. How to lead students from facts to abstract truths

You have come across this before: a student has memorised a rule, law, formula or conclusion, but is not able to apply that knowledge, and sometimes does not even understand the essence of what they have memorised. This is especially evident when studying grammar, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, physics, chemistry, and any subject whose content is made up of a system of generalisations. Knowledge in these subjects is expressed first and foremost in an ability to apply these generalisations in practical work.

Usually in such cases teachers say that the student has crammed the material without understanding it. But why have they crammed? What do we have to do to prevent the major evil of cramming?

Memorisation must be based on understanding. Lead a student to memorisation through the urge to make sense of a host of facts and phenomena. Do not condone the memorisation of material that is not yet comprehended and made sense of. The path that leads from the search for meaning in facts and phenomena to a deep understanding of abstract truths (rules, formulae, laws, conclusions) is via practical work that demonstrates a mastery of knowledge.

Experienced teachers are able to instruct students is such a way that memorisation takes place through a process of seeking meaning, through a thoughtful investigation of facts and phenomena. The students are presented, for example, with a rule regarding the correct use of the hard sign in Russian spelling. The teacher leads them to memorise the rule and to apply it with understanding via an analysis of numerous facts, examining words that contain the hard sign and explaining the spelling of these words. In essence the rule is arrived at multiple times by making sense of more and more new facts. The students are gradually convinced that they are dealing with a true generalisation. The application of this truth to multiple words is understood as a rule. It is memorised due to the fact that an understanding of it is arrived at many times.

In the lessons of experienced teachers a rule or conclusion is memorised without any special effort to memorise. The effort to make sense of facts simultaneously leads to gradual memorisation of a generalisation. The more the search for meaning and memorisation constitute a single process, and the more knowledge involves awareness, the more a student is able to apply that knowledge in practice. The ability to apply knowledge in practical work depends on how the student arrived at memorisation of that knowledge. If the knowledge was memorised without understanding, without analysing facts and phenomena, the student is unable to apply it.

This is a very important principle in the teaching process. Many years of experience has led me to the conclusion that if in primary school students have already acquired the ability to identify abstract concepts in the process of analysing facts and phenomena, they will have acquired a very important attribute in intellectual work: the ability to apprehend a number of interdependent objects, facts, circumstances, phenomena or events. In other words, they are able to think about cause and effect relationships, whether they be functional, temporal, or of some other nature. Many instances have convinced me that the ability to think about the elements of an arithmetical problem (especially in grades four and five) depends on this very ability to master abstract generalisations. Students who memorise abstract generalisations without analysing a sufficient quantity of data are unable to think about problems, or to mentally grasp the relationships between quantities. And conversely, if the memorisation of abstract

truths is based on the thoughtful investigation of facts, if students remember without learning by heart, they see in an arithmetical problem not a mere combination of numbers, but interdependent quantities. Reading the elements of a problem, making sense of them, they first abstract the problem from the numbers, solving it in general terms, without performing concrete arithmetical operations.

Many instances, many children's lives, have convinced me that when children fall behind in arithemetic (and then in algebra), it is the result of hard to detect shortcomings in intellectual work, such as I have been discussing. People often talk about the links between subjects. Every teacher knows very well that they should look for points of contact with the material of other subjects. But links between subjects go beyond this. I am firmly convinced that the deepest links are not to be found so much in the factual content as in the character of the intellectual work. Intellectual work that is based on scientific principles can mean that mathematics helps children to understand history, and history can facilitate the development of mathematical abilities.

It is common knowledge that for many primary school teachers and teachers of language and literature, the battle to consciously master grammatical rules is a stumbling block. The poor literacy of a significant number of students is a great misfortune for schools. I can cite an example. One student studying Russian language failed to master the spelling of the prefixes *raz-/ ras-* and *bez-/ bes-*. He made many mistakes as a result of not mastering the rule governing the spelling of these prefixes. [These pairs of prefixes are identical in meaning, but the ones ending in voiced consonants are added to stems beginning with a voiced consonant, and those ending in an unvoiced consonant are added to stems beginning with an unvoiced consonant.] In an attempt to overcome this deficiency, the teacher from time to time gave the student exercises in the application of the appropriate rule. He told the student first to learn the rule by heart and then to complete the exercise. This work might have been expected to yield a positive result, but it did not. In Grade Ten [the final year of high school] the student still made mistakes in an essay written during an exam, writing 'raztsvetaet' and 'rasbezhalsya' [instead of 'rastsvetaet' and 'razbezhalsya'].

What is going on here? What is the reason for this strange phenomenon? Many years of experience have led me to the conclusion that the ability (or inability) to apply knowledge, and the interpretation of facts in the process of acquiring knowledge, are most clearly manifested in the study of grammar. Here it is the first acquaintance with the abstract principle or generalisation (the grammatical rule) that is of decisive significance. It is not such a simple matter to ensure that students do not make a lot of mistakes when first studying the material, and at the same time to ensure that they correctly formulate a rule and learn it.

For this reason I will devote the next section to a discussion of how to approach new material.

On moral education

From *I will tell you a story: Philosophy for children* (pp 15-16)

A person's moral character depends to a great extent on what brings them joy and happiness in childhood. If we were to try and express the essence of education in an aphorism, it would not be a distortion of the truth to say that the virtues and vices that take root in a *pupil's* soul are *fed* by joys and sorrows, happiness and misfortune, disappointments and delights, depression and inspiration. I have deliberately juxtaposed and highlighted the works 'pupil' (*pitomets*) and 'fed' (*pitat'*). [In Russian, the two words are formed from the same lexical root.] The wise word *pitomets* [pupil, charge] is linked by many threads to the word *pitat'* [to feed or nourish]. Children are nourished not only by their mothers' milk and their daily bread, but by the food of the spirit. To learn to nourish children with joys and sorrows—that is the art of education. A person's nobility of spirit depends ultimately on what elicited delight or tears in childhood. Generosity and unselfishness are totally dependent on the nobility of our sources of delight and disappointment, joys and sorrows. I am not exaggerating in the slightest when I assure my dearest readers—young teachers—that the joy that comes from generosity is the noblest of spiritual impulses, capable of awakening in young hearts feelings of wonder at human nobility, and pride from a consciousness of their own participation in that nobility.

One characteristic of education as an art is that the whole process involves an educator's intervention in the life of the human spirit—in all that is so complex and at times hard to capture in the way a person expresses themselves. I am firmly convinced that all the actions and works that we motivate our students to undertake should be incorporated in the life of the human spirit. Only then will our everyday lives and relationships constitute an education, without the need for any specially invented forms of activity. If I give a spade to a child and ask them to plant a tree, that means that the future work that forms the essence of my intention, the tree itself, the earth and water that will feed its life—all of these things will express a spiritual impulse and relationship. One of the most unacceptable ills of education is the fact that children's work—sometimes very significant work—appears to be divorced from the life of the spirit, does not inspire children or develop conviction, does not awaken thought, feelings or the exercise of the will. (Continued on next page)

On moral education (continued)

In order to see themselves as others see them, little people must learn to see life. They must learn to see another person, to understand and feel the beauty in them, to be inspired with feelings of admiration, to compare themselves with what they have seen and understood, and to measure their own worth against those whom they consider to be models. I consider it very important to tell adolescents and young men and women about how others have lived their lives, about what they have achieved, and how they have fulfilled their duty to future generations, who in their turn will accept the baton from them, continuing their creativity and constructive efforts. I have tried to do this in the story 'The happiest person in the world'.

Stories for Children

The happiest person in the world

In a Ukrainian village there lived a very old woman. She had raised seven sons and seven daughters. Each son and each daughter had raised seven grandchildren, and each grandchild had raised three great grandchildren. Only one of her grandchildren, who had only been married a few years, had no children. This grandchild's name was Vera.

One warm summer day the 'great mother', as all her descendents called her, celebrated her one hundred and first birthday. All her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren came to congratulate her. They gathered around her in the apple orchard and bowed low to the ground, wishing her good health, keen vision, sensitive hearing and a just tongue.

The great grandmother looked around at all her descendents and saw that they were all there except Vera. Her old heart felt pained. She was just going to ask why Vera was not there, when suddenly her neighbour came running, bowed to the great mother and said, 'Vera has just given birth to a son.'

The great mother gave a sigh of relief. Joy shone in her eyes. She looked into the eyes of each of children and said:

'I am dying because I will never again experience such joy.'

And she died the happiest person in the world.

People brought life

In the middle of the green steppe there was a dark grey island called the Dead Field. Since time immemorial nothing had grown in that field, because there was so much salt in the soil. Above the baked clay currents of hot air rose. Not a blade of grass, not a single grasshopper, not a flower, nothing alive could be found in the Dead Field. No lark ever sang over the Dead Field, crows avoided it, and the sky above it was not blue, but grey.

But then a man came to the to the Dead Field. He brought a basket of fertile black soil and sprinkled it over the earth. He brought a second basket, a third, a tenth. The days, months and years passed, and the man kept bringing black soil to the Dead Field, from morning till night. He spread black soil all over the field and sowed wheat there.

And a miracle happened. The Dead Field turned green. The wheat rustled and produced ears of grain. The grasshoppers sang, the grey sky turned blue, and a lark began to sing above the ripening crop. Larks all over the world listened to its song. It sang that people are the strongest in the world.