

On Teaching Suki

Suki is an exciting, yet demanding, program for teaching children how to make the (often painful) transition from speaking to writing, to encourage them to develop a poetic sensitivity and an appreciation for some main themes in the philosophy of art and even metaphysics. In what follows, I would like to indicate some of the reasons I find the program exciting — besides the fact that it can be successful in accomplishing its objectives — as well as some reasons for believing it difficult to teach — indeed, I believe it is the most difficult in the series of readings published by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC).

For those readers who are either not familiar with Suki at all or, if they are, have not yet used the program with children, a few introductory words are necessary to appreciate what I want to say about my experiences with it. First, the program is designed in principle for children in grades 7-9. But in actual fact, as with other IAPC materials, there is quite a bit of “stretch” possible in appropriate age levels. In my own case, I have employed Suki over the last three years in working with sixth-graders, eighth-graders, and high-school seniors in the United States and with 12-14 year-old children at a workshop in England. In each instance, the children concerned related well to the text, although some changes had to be made for sixth-graders. These alterations consisted largely of substitutions of poems to eliminate the more difficult ones.

Second, the fulcrum on which the book’s strategy turns is not, as one might expect from the title, the character of Suki, but rather Harry Stottlemeier. Indeed, had such a choice not been dreadfully pedestrian, the title might well have been Harry Stottlemeier’s Second Discovery or (worse yet) The Continuing Education of Harry Stottlemeier. For what happens to Harry is that he finally manages to see the world and himself in a different way and this he has to learn in order to cope with two interrelated crises in his freshman English class. In experiencing both difficulties, Harry is designedly very typical of many youngsters, and certainly those whom I have taught over the last three years.

The first of these crises is apparent in Harry’s reaction to the first assignment which his teacher, Mr. Newberry, sets in class. Harry “stared at the board unbelievably. He’d never had an assignment before that had anything to do with writing fiction or poetry. Yet here, suddenly, was this terrifying and inescapable assignment. ‘I can’t write,’ The thought beat in his mind like a drum.”¹ Harry’s second pitfall is that he cannot relate well to poetry or feelings generally — except for fear and anger at being forced to consider a subject in which he does not see any sense. When, for example, Suki wants to share with him the pleasure of Robert Frost’s poem, “Tree at My Window,” Harry’s unsympathetic and brusque response terminates in “All I know is, trees are for the birds, and so is poetry” (Suki, p. 10).

Harry’s rationalization for his inability (later on, he even convinces himself that it is a disability) is equally typical of children in his situation: “I have nothing to write about.” By this he means that he has not exciting experiences and thus no impetus to write. He just goes to school, and that’s it. Indeed, in one rather pathetic scene — born out of increasing desperation at having no ideas for

a composition assignment — he even takes to hanging around the fire station in a vain effort to vicariously absorb some real adventures. (The fireman to whom Harry mistakenly attributes a life of increasing thrills seeks to puncture Harry’s bubble. But the dialogue is cut short when the alarm signals a fire at, of all the unadventurous, boring, and ironic places for Harry, the high school itself.)

If Harry’s self-perception and rationalization are typical of many youngsters and young adults — as I believe they are — what can be done to break down these barriers? Exactly what happens to Harry: Mr. Newberry (1) makes him (and his classmates) constantly practice writing, and Suki as well as his uncompromising teacher (2) try to get Harry to pay closer attention to what he sees so that he can express it properly. Both halves of this double-barrelled strategy need some explanation. But before doing so, I would like to point out that children studying Suki who have already had the Harry program can profitably recast Harry’s difficulty here in terms of the traditional decision-making/problem-solving cycle. Harry is in trouble because he cannot perform correctly the very first step, i.e., to recognize and define his problem. And this is so because, in large part, he is plainly rattled by having to perform and be judged on unfamiliar and difficult terrain. In thus failing to recognize and define his true problem, he is again quite typical of many children and adults as well. His problem is really that he has tunnel vision—the tunnel being roughly the view that logic and science form the only true perspective on reality — which cannot be cured until the tunnel is recognized for what it is.

How, then, do Mr. Newberry and Suki try to correct Harry’s vision? Correspondingly, how is Suki written to perform the same office for similarly situated children reading it? The first strategy, continued practice in writing, is absolutely essential. This is why Mr. Newberry is always assigning “warm-up exercises,” “grab-bag” poems to complete, concrete and abstract subjects to render into verse, and the like. In working with Suki, I can testify from my own experience how easy it is to overlook this crucial part of the program. It is too easy to get wrapped up in the text and avoid giving children this essential practice. Part of the reason why one can fall into such a trap is that it is more difficult, and some may be motivated by a desire not to alienate children — especially in the beginning of the program.² But, I submit, it is only on the basis of such practice that children can finally achieve an insight into the concept of poetry as liberation, a freedom of the spirit, which forms the main theme of Chapter 4, section ii. [Hereafter, chapters and their sub-sections will be abbreviated as say, 4, §ii.] The most effective way to make sure children get enough practice writing is to constantly repair to the teacher’s manual, Writing: How and Why, for a gold mine of discussion questions and exercises.

(Teachers of Suki should also be sensitive to what is too easy to miss the first time through the book, namely that the theme of freedom and constraint permeates many of the episodes, not the least of which is Harry’s very struggle to write. It is also central to the discussion of dating relationships in 4, §i.)

The other half of Suki’s, strategy in dealing with Harry and similarly situated children is to try to get them to pay closer attention to what they see and then bring that enriched vision to poetic expression. Much of the theoretical foundation for Suki lies in

John Dewey's Art as Experience which maintained, among other things, that there is a fundamental continuity between aesthetic and non-aesthetic modes of experience. This means in turn that aesthetic experience is somehow already immanent in non-aesthetic experience and must be pried out. And that is what Mr. Newberry and Suki attempt for Harry. He needs to re-see the world and people within it for themselves rather than taking them for granted. He needs to pay attention to, and try to express, what is really happening rather than merely describing a certain set of data.

Thus in the following reaction to Frost's "Tree at My Window," Harry shows himself plainly insensitive to the difference between description and expression. Suki asks him (p. 10):

"Do you like it?"

"I don't know. I guess I see what it's getting at — guy has a tree outside his window. But what's all that stuff about outer and inner weather?"

When Suki tries to explain certain similarities between trees and people, Harry is clearly at sea:

"Suki, you've got a tree outside your window: that's a fact. But when you talk as though it's got a head of some kind — that's just fiction" (p. 10).

But how can children be taught to pay closer attention to what they experience? And how can they be encouraged to bring their enhanced vision to expression? Suki attempts to do this in part through the use of poems and dramatic scenes rich in sensuously immediate images. In terms of the poems, it is no accident that the very first one Mr. Newberry sets the children to analyse is a vivid, sensuously immediate, and difficult sonnet ("As Kingfishers catch fire ...") by Gerard Manley Hopkins. The latter's famous line, "There lives the deepest freshness deep down things" could well express in microcosm the goal of the entire Suki program.

And in terms of the dramatic episodes, the book abounds in concrete, vivid images to stimulate the poet in us all. For example, in the text at 5, §i—which is surely one of the best pieces of writing in all the IAPC materials — Suki pays her first visit to her grandparents' farm. Two brief passages from her experiences there (pp. 57, 58) are, in my opinion, deeply illuminative of the influence of Hopkins and of the power of the writing in Suki:

Finally, they wound their way back up the path to the house. In the living room, the great stone fireplace had been lit, and Suki, Anne and Kio stood warming themselves in front of it, slowly rotating as if on individual spits. They were hungry, and the food, when it came, was so delicious they almost couldn't recognize it. The bread, the milk, the eggs, the butter, the vegetables — every taste was fresh, distinct and intense ...

Suki watched the flames in the fireplace. In her imagination she saw the great barn ablaze, and her grandmother restraining her grandfather. "Fire," she said to herself. Other images thronged into her mind, the pump, the bracing autumn air, the soft turf of the meadow.

"Earth, air, fire and water," she thought.

Does not this simple description compare well with more overargued and abstract accounts of our fundamental unity with nature?

But Suki also abounds in less obvious ways with vivid sensuous images which are all too easy for first-time readers and teachers

alike to miss. There is (1) the episode (2, §iv) in which Harry and Suki sit by Belcher's Brook, a name apparently not intended to inspire poetic sensitivity, and concentrate on the shining of the sun instead of the pedestrian fact that the sun is shining. There are (2) a number of references to Suki's father's (Mr. Tong) furniture shop (see, for instance, 4 §iii; and 10 §iv) in which the author invites us to consider the feel of hand-planed dowels and fresh rush used for chair seats, the scents of many different kinds of woods, and the odors of various finishing oils, lacquers, and shellacs. Like the food on the farm, these impressions are "fresh, distinct, and intense." There is also (3) the culmination of Suki and Harry's relationship (10, §iv) in which they are awakened to the excitement of young love, a rite of passage as old as humanity and yet ever fresh. Older children sometimes enjoy talking about this episode, but more often — at least in my experience — intra-class social relationships are such that anonymous writing exercises are preferable.

Several kinds of assignments could be made at this point, but one of the best is a poem about what it feels like to first fall in love. Some of these can be read aloud, since they are anonymous, and discussed by the class. (This is one exercise that never fails to elicit keen interest all round!) Then students can compare their own efforts with Gwendolyn Brooks' superb poem, "To Be in Love" ("Writing: How and Why, p. 367), in which she expresses her experience as being "the beautiful half of a golden hurt."

After being sensitized to the concrete, vivid imagery in Suki, students should be encouraged to try their hands at writing poems about very ordinary, commonly present objects in their everyday experiences. The more commonplace and taken-for-granted, the better, for the aim is to pay more attention to them and re-see them with an eye for poetic expression.

Thus far, I have been concerned to praise Suki, and although, I do not now want to bury it, no discussion of the program would be complete without mentioning the difficulties one is apt to encounter in teaching it — at least in the United States. Why is it, really, that so many children find writing inherently difficult, and find it even more difficult to hitch that arduous chore to that of developing a sensitivity to poetry? There are at least three main social causes, three very large and complex obstacles to the success of Suki which originate outside the space and time of the classroom. Although each of these has already elicited many lengthy books by philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and cultural anthropologists, space limitations here permit only the briefest account.

The first of these causes consists in a variegated and pervasive mediation of the senses which makes it quite difficult for many children to feel any affinity with the "fresh, distinct and intense" sensations referred to above. Many children today, particularly in urban centers, have their contact with nature mediated in various ways, and so are cut off (alienated) from it. For example, the one implicit in the farm episode, the industrial production of "light-bulb" food can blunt any appreciation for "the real thing" (not Coca-Cola). As another instance, Robert Pirsig observes in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance how families travelling the highways in their air-conditioned cocoons are irretrievably cut off from the nature they seek to enjoy. Yet again, consider all the ways that children's experiences are mediated electronically — chiefly through television — to such an extent that media-

enhanced images become life-like, while those that are not seem less real. It is interesting that there are signs in French national parks which warn visitors, "Turn off your transistors, and open your eyes and ears." Not only have I seen no such signs in this country, but also campgrounds at our national parks abound with luxurious recreational vehicles which thoroughly mediate — electronically and otherwise — their somnolescent owners' contact with the nature they came to admire. Not the least of these forms of mediation (and alienation) is the ubiquitous television set.

And how many children today really have first-hand experiences with woodshops or handmade furniture? I can certainly appreciate Suki's feelings because I also make furniture, but the force of economic necessity is such that most of the furniture in most people's homes (including my own) has been turned out in vast, impersonal factories, untouched by human hands. In those standardized production processes, as all across the industrial spectrum, irregularities associated with hand-made pieces are treated as imperfections. Although there is a compelling argument against this view in 4, §iii, it is sometimes a struggle for children to be able to grasp it because they have been successfully conditioned to the contrary. Few young people I have worked with have directly experienced the deep and abiding pleasures of the art and craft of the woodworker or many other crafts, for that matter. But many of them do have videorecorders on which they have watched films such as Jaws or Star Wars 13 times. (They also spend their weekends, and money, plugged into videogames.)

All of these forms of mediation are obstacles to children's appreciation of the Suki program, but they are not insuperable. One of the most helpful techniques for dealing with them is to get students to see the forms of mediation themselves and then build them into a discussion of freedom and internal constraints of which we are not aware. I have also been helped along in such discussions by the fact that, corresponding to the mediation and alienation from nature, there is also a deep hunger for it, an inchoate sense of something's being missing. Films such as E.T. are useful for analysis here as well, since that strangely loveable creature combines images of high technology along with a simpler life tied to natural rhythms.

The second main cause of young people's difficulties in appreciating the Suki program is tightly related to the first. It is the dizzying speed at which we live, particularly in the United States. We inhabit a highly complex, technological, industrial society in which most people have to live and work at a furiously exhausting pace. Certainly children are affected by this, for the demands of successful social adaptation find their way into the very bone and marrow of the school curriculum. For instance, outside school, vast multi-billion-dollar industries exist solely for the processing, storage, and retrieval of information at great speed. In school, reading and study skills as well as computer-assisted instruction (CAI) emphasize similar abilities at the individual level. Not enough care is taken, I think, to distinguish the "information" for which these are proper techniques, and that where it is decidedly inappropriate. Poetry and creative expression clearly fall within the latter. Along with encouraging children to pay more attention to what they see — already difficult enough in our society — we need to teach them that there really is (a) time for everything under heaven, including a reading that is not speedy, but rather reflective and meditative. I believe, incidentally, that CAI is not

only opposed to this task, but that much more imaginative uses could be made of computers to encourage children's creative expression.

The third main obstacle which I have encountered in teaching Suki also has to do with the central theme of freedom and constraint. It is that many children, chiefly boys, have been (and continue to be) socialized in such a way as to mutilate the development of poetic sensitivity, an appreciation for art, and feelings generally. Here again, I think, Harry Stottlemeier is quite typical. Whether he and Suki are also stereotypical as some teachers and graduate students in my workshops have concluded — is another matter. Certainly on the surface, Suki looks to be a stereotype of an aesthetically gifted, Oriental female, while Harry is quintessentially ... what? Well, something like, Western, technocratic, logical and insensitive.

But even if both characters were stereotypes, which I do not believe, they would not be entirely false. To consider only the case of Harry, many, if not most, boys in classes in which I have used Suki have been cut off from poetry and more sensitive feelings because of the sexist role models in which they have been cast. The roles, of course, are formed along these too familiar and depressing lines: girls are good nurturers, while boys are good managers. Girls should be warm and sensitive and delicate (read: feminine), whereas boys should be strong and brave. (Tears can be becoming in a girl or woman, but are inconsistent with masculinity.) Whereas girls ought to develop their obvious "natural" talents for poetry, art, music, and literature, boys have equally "natural" endowments for "intellectual" subjects such as science and math. Not accidentally, these are called the "hard" subjects, in many senses of that overworked word (e.g., the "hard" versus the "soft" sciences). In Suki, at p. 48, Suki is helping Harry with his poetry while he is helping her with her math. Only "She wondered if she was pretending to be more helpless than she actually was." In short, girls ought to develop their feelings, while boys ought to suppress theirs.

The unhappy persistence of these sexist and mutually destructive stereotypes — never anywhere explicitly written down, but everywhere presupposed and absorbed like something in the air — coupled with a basic anti-intellectual and even philistine tenor to our society, at least as far as the arts and humanities are concerned, create a lot of resistance on the part of many boys to getting involved with poetry at all. They especially need to see poetry as liberation and the forces of the internal constraints that weigh them down, and the first section of Chapter 4 — which deals with dating relationships — is just the place to involve them in such a discussion. It is as exciting for real-life teachers, as in Suki it is for Mr. Newberry, when young people begin to discover powers of expression not before known or suspected.

Some popular music, such as songs by Judy Collins or Simon and Garfunkel, can be used to encourage poetic expression — poetry, after all, was once sung. But I must confess that I do not find much in contemporary rock music — the preferred genre of most children with whom I have worked — which lends itself to an appreciation of poetry or to the development of a great sensitivity to feelings. Or if there is, it appears to be the wrong sort of feelings — sado-masochistic and often extremely violent. For example, in the past, when the beautiful girl approached the handsome young man singing a ballad about the need for love, stage produc-

tions and films typically showed her swept up into his protecting embrace. However illusionary the appearance, at least the audience got a model of a happy and mutually fulfilling ending. Buy today, on an especially popular cable-TV channel which specializes in providing imaginative visuals for rock songs, our heroine is just as likely as not to have the plaint of her loneliness answered with a broken jaw instead of Gwendolyn Brooks' "golden hurt." And the would-be lover is a frightening-looking character whom you would never want to meet in a dark alley (or anywhere else).

Moreover, the names of some contemporary rock groups, to say nothing of their on-stage behavior, suggests an obsession with death, nihilism, and nuclear catastrophe. (Thomas Merton once wrote that even to have built nuclear weapons was to have them go off the first time.) Children in whose social conditioning such music plays a substantial role over a long period of time might in the end have far more serious problems than damaged ear drums and an inability to appreciate books like Suki. I am not pessimistically certain that they will, however, because, among other things, they themselves are eager to discuss such things. I regard that as a healthy sign and part of the continual pleasure of working with young people. But whatever the eventual results of their social conditioning, that is clearly another story.

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NOTES

¹Matthew Lipman, Suki (Upper Montclair, N.J.: The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1978), p. 6. All subsequent citations from Suki will be taken from this edition and will appear in the text with page numbers.

²Those who do not find it hard should witness the tortured reactions of college professors at IAPC training workshops when they are suddenly asked to write poems. Such exercises are very useful reminders of the difficulty children such as Harry often face in trying to cope with assignments.