

Accelerated Learning

**The value of playing games, singing songs, listening to stories -
and how learning is improved by the power of suggestion**

An Interview with Libyan Labiosa, by Alan AtKisson

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What if you could learn a lot more, a lot faster, and have a lot more fun doing it? You can. Accelerated learning is one of the most exciting and effective applications of the new learning theories, and it's revolutionizing learning in schools, corporations, and living rooms all over the world.

Based on the work of Bulgarian psychiatrist Georgi Lozanov, who developed the theory of "suggestopedia," and Dr. Evelyn Gateva, a language educator, accelerated learning also incorporates Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (see [Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom](#), this issue) and the power of the arts (see [The Case for the Arts](#), this issue). In 1978 the Bulgarian government put the brakes on the spread of accelerated learning by refusing to allow Lozanov to communicate with the outside world. But the model didn't completely lose momentum - and interest has accelerated tremendously since glasnost hit Bulgaria in 1987.

Libyan Labiosa is President of the Society for Accelerative Learning and Teaching (Box 1549, Welch Station, Ames, IA 50010). She is also the International Product Developer for Accelerated Learning Systems (3028 Emerson Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55408, 612/827-4856). I caught up with her in London by telephone.

Alan: *How does accelerated learning work?*

Libyan: Accelerated learning is a multi-modal, multi-sensory approach. We take into consideration different learning styles, as well as all the senses: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, even gustatory and olfactory, depending on the age group.

Alan: *So people might actually be sniffing something in order to connect it with the thing they need to learn?*

Libyan: Right. We also use the power of the arts - music, visual arts, drama, dance, movement - and students actually *perform* the material to some extent. What we're really doing is combining theories of multiple intelligence together with art, which is a very solid base for retaining information longer, with a very deep understanding of that material. It far surpasses rote learning.

Alan: *Or memorizing the rules of grammar. What makes this method "accelerated"?*

Libyan: It's not accelerated in terms of being speedy so much as it is in terms of being *efficient* - we use time and space in the class in a very efficient way. The teacher's plan is incredibly detailed, so that when the plan is carried out, the students *get* it. They seem to absorb material much faster and remember it longer.

Alan: *It also sounds like fun. Is it?*

Libyan: Oh, it's immensely fun! The classes are based on the model that Dr. Georgi Lozanov developed with his colleague, Dr. Evelynna Gateva. Their approach is to present information to pupils in a cycle: First we introduce the pupils to information, then we *activate* it. We present a global perspective on the information, but we are also decoding its different parts.

Alan: *So you give them the big picture at the same time that you're breaking it up so they can see how the pieces fit together.*

Libyan: Right. We start with the "Concert Phase," which is unique to accelerated learning. First, in the "Active Concert," we might play the music of classical and romantic composers - such as Mozart, Brahms, or Beethoven - while the teacher reads a text very emphatically, very dramatically. The text is usually a drama, written in a very rhythmical manner, and it has many embedded messages in it about how much fun learning is and how easy the subject matter is to be learned. The experience is very powerful - you can imagine the impact of hearing a teacher actually *reading* to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony!

In a foreign language class, for example, the text might be a story. And it just happens that in that story are embedded those high frequency phrases that we normally learn in a foreign language class, except we're learning them in their social and cultural context.

It's more interesting for the pupils - is Pedro going to fall in love with Helen? And what's going to happen on his trip to Washington? Meanwhile, the students are learning vocabulary about giving directions, as well as descriptive adjectives and complex verb forms, but they don't know it! We slip it in through the back door.

Alan: *What's interesting to me is that this sounds like common sense - and yet this is a new idea.*

Libyan: Well, it's new and it's not new. What's new about it is that in accelerated learning we use all of these elements *consistently*, versus using them once in a while when the pupils are getting antsy. Foreign language teachers are famous for playing games with their pupils - but do they always play games? And are the games both *affective* and *effective* in nature - that is, do they make a positive psychological impact while getting the information across?

In fact, Dr. Gateva and Dr. Lozanov have recently been doing research on the "byproducts," as they call them, of accelerated learning. They found that one byproduct involves the development of the *personality* of the pupil. The pupils learn higher-order thinking skills, how to be more creative, and how to be more free as far as their choices in life are concerned.

Alan: *How does accelerated learning expand a student's sense of freedom?*

Libyan: By enhancing their *desire* to learn. We present all of the information in context, and what happens is that the pupils want to learn *more*. They're curious, and they realize there must be some hidden agenda - after all, we *are* learning Spanish or whatever. So, where's the grammar?

But instead of *dictating* a lesson on grammar, the teacher is role-playing, or playing games, or singing songs, and *embedded* within that material is the grammar. Eventually the pupil will say, "You know, I really can't wait to do some more of this subjunctive tense stuff because it allows me to express myself better in Spanish. Can you please give me some more of those rules so I'll get it right?" You don't get *that* in other classes.

Alan: *No, I guess you don't! What comes next in the accelerated learning process?*

Libyan: Directly following the Active Concert is a second one called the Passive Concert. The teacher reads the text again, but now in normal tone of voice. In Concert 1, the pronunciation was deliberate and very careful, almost like feeding little morsels of information to the pupils. But in Concert 2 we're speaking as one would normally speak, say on a nice street in Mexico where people are talking pretty fast. And we would use Baroque pieces of music. The pupils don't necessarily have their book in front of them - they're just listening to the teacher's voice and re-enacting the content of the play in their mind's eye. It *solidifies* the meaning of the words as they recreate the story in their heads.

Alan: *So engaging that inner movie screen is very important to the process.*

Libyan: Right. Then, directly following that, they would go home and go to sleep. The next day would begin the "Activation Phase," which is where we spend about 75% of our time in the classroom. Having presented 500 or 2,000 words in a concert reading, we then go back and say, "Well, what areas did we cover? We covered clothes, directions, greetings, numbers." We divide the reading out into the different lexical and grammatical units that were embedded in the text.

And then we play games dealing with each one of those items, taking into consideration the multiple intelligence theories of Howard Gardner. Intrapersonal learners might sit by themselves and invent their own explanations or highlight certain parts of the text. Those who prefer interpersonal learning might form groups for playing games. Others might draw a picture about their favorite city, and then have to tell their classmates - in the target language - about that city, and answer questions about it. Or they might compose a song about the lesson using their favorite tune.

Alan: *You're talking about foreign languages here. Would the process look similar for a science class? Would there be songs about relativity theory?*

Libyan: Yes, or the lungs and how we breathe, and how the quality of the environment affects our lungs. Or you might make puppets of the different organs in the body. It's the same pattern, because thinking in terms of science and math is sometimes a foreign language for students.

Alan: *How did Lozanov dream up this method of learning, and why does he call it "suggestopedia"?*

Libyan: Dr. Lozanov himself has a problem with the term "suggestopedia" - it's a bad translation from the Bulgarian, but it's as close as we could get. As a psychiatrist, he had studied clinical suggestion with his patients - but he also studied the Indian gurus and the Buddhist monks, and he found that those people can learn *volumes* of material.

He was able to travel to India in the early 1960s and observe the monks at work, and he realized that there were things that *always* occurred no matter what group he was studying. For example, the environment was very important - it would *suggest* silence, observation, relaxation. It wasn't necessary for someone to tell you, "Okay, we're all going to relax now!" because the environment was *inviting* you to relax.

That's now reflected in the accelerated learning methods. It isn't that the teacher says "We're going to learn about the subjunctive now." Instead, the classroom is set up to *invite* you to learn the subjunctive. The posters on the walls, the colors, the textures, the way the seats are arranged, perhaps even the way the teacher is dressed, all make a difference. Are the books on your desk when you come into the classroom? Or does the teacher *give* you the book, have eye contact with you, perhaps even smile as she does so? All of those things - which are quite magical in kindergarten - bring that quality of joy to the classroom *throughout* life-long learning.

Alan: *To rephrase Robert Fulghum, "Everything I need to know for making learning fun I learned in kindergarten."*

Libyan: That's an important point, because we don't do a lot of those things anymore for our pupils. If we decorate the classroom, we do it in September and it stays up for the rest of the year. Only the very early elementary school teachers will change the classroom to go with the season. Well, the same type of thing can be done for a lexical and grammatical unit - there could be a different way to decorate the room to teach the past tense, or to teach about the kidneys and their function, or to teach about algebraic formulas. In fact, I recommend to my teachers that they change their room every ten hours of instruction.

Now, a lot of teachers will say "That's a lot of work!" But you can have your *pupils* make all of the peripheral stimuli to put up on the walls as part of the learning process.

Alan: *Is the importance of these peripheral stimuli something Lozanov observed in India?*

Libyan: Yes. But in America, we're *already* high on peripheral stimuli - if you just walk down the street you're bombarded by signs and radio messages and songs that tell us something about who we are as people and who we are as a society. Lozanov says, why don't we take that suggestion and bring it to the classroom? Let's suggest that it's really lots of *fun* to do the subjunctive in Spanish, and it's really quite *interesting* to learn about our lungs, and so on.

Alan: *How does accelerated learning deal with making errors?*

Libyan: In that same, positive manner. When somebody makes a mistake, instead of having a figurative alarm go off and a hook emerge to drag the student out of the classroom, we would say, "That's okay, you made an error - that's part of life, and you'll get it better next time." We seek gently to correct them and to encourage them to express themselves.

The model is something like student as athlete and teacher as coach. When you're working at becoming a good athlete, your coach isn't going to say "Too bad, you didn't get to a certain mark, you can't play any more." On the contrary, he encourages you to figure out better ways of doing it so that next time you can accomplish your goal.

Alan: *How did you get interested in accelerated learning?*

Libyan: I was working on my Master's Degree at Boston University, and in my first teaching experience there, I was told to tell my students that we were going to spend the entire semester on the subjunctive, that it was the most difficult item, that most of them would *not* get it, and that *whether* they got it would determine whether or not they would continue to study Spanish. Needless to say, the pupils were not into it.

And I thought, this is ridiculous! I was studying to become a Spanish teacher, and my students were not learning Spanish! Spanish was being *taught* to them, but it was going straight *through* them. They weren't retaining anything.

So that drew me towards figuring out a better way of teaching. I came across John Rassias's work, the Dartmouth Method. He believes that if we can emotionally charge the material for our pupils, they'll learn better and faster.

That got me interested in other teaching methodologies, but I didn't think it was the whole answer. Then I came across *Total Physical Response* by James Asher, and he basically says that we learn kinesthetically. But I kept seeing that while there were some pupils in the classroom who reacted to the emotionally-charged material, and some who reacted to the kinesthetic or physical material, I *still* wasn't getting everybody.

That's when I heard about Dr. Lozanov, and I realized the importance of *attitude* and suggestion. My attitude as a teacher was that learning was not my job, but the *students'* job - they were supposed to do their homework. But Lozanov shifts the responsibility - it *is* your job. You are their *teacher*, and it's your job to figure out ways to make information more attractive to your pupils.

In other words, in my earlier years of teaching, I always thought it was the *pupils* that were doing it wrong. I didn't realize that it was *me*, in terms of my approach to teaching in the classroom. It wasn't that I was doing it wrong - I just didn't really know how to do it. So when I learned about Dr. Lozanov's work on suggestion and attended a workshop by Dr. Charles Schmidt from San Francisco, it pretty much changed my life. I decided that this is what I was going to do, and I have done nothing but this seven days a week, fourteen hours a day, for the past five years.

Alan: *When you train teachers in the accelerated learning method, do you use the method itself?*

Libyan: That's an interesting question. Some trainers, including Dr. Lozanov, think that it's important to learn *about* it, instead of *acquiring* it by doing it. But then, he lectures, while his colleague Dr. Gateva - who has done most of the research in creating classroom applications for the theory - will teach you an Italian class so that you will actually experience the suggestopedic model.

I do a little bit of both. I give the teachers the theory in a very quick manner and then I activate the theory - so I create a little microcosm of the instructional design model to teach the teachers about accelerated learning. By the time they're done with the teacher training, they have a bag of tricks comprised of a hundred or more activations.

Alan: *Some people may not have access to training in this method, so what aspects of it could they put into practice right away?*

Libyan: Two things they can use immediately are changing the environment of their classrooms as I was describing earlier - changing the decorations, and the structure of the classroom so that the pupils don't feel nailed into chairs which are nailed into the floor.

The second thing I would recommend is the use of activation in the classroom - perhaps play one game every day in class that has an affective and an effective purpose to it. Just one! Get the pupils involved so that they are using all of their sensory modalities instead of just doing logical, sequential, and linguistic forms of learning.

Alan: *It strikes me that this method of teaching is very humane, very pro-learner.*

Libyan: Oh, very much so. When pupils are performing a subject, they're learning in an integrative fashion. It helps them learn to communicate better and to freely express themselves, and heightened communication prepares us for dealing with a higher-tech society.

But it's also important to have structure within the flexibility - as in Mozart, where he creates variations on the tunes and the phrasings so often, yet there is pattern and structure to the music. Accelerated learning brings that imitation of art and nature into the classroom, and with it a sense of harmony and wholeness, but in a very scientific manner. It's a nice combination.

You know, Dr. Lozanov talks about an interesting phenomenon - he says that there are illnesses brought on by the way we are taught.

Alan: *I know a few students who might agree.*

Libyan: It's a very provocative idea - the fact that our teaching methodology may be *part* of the reason for the increased amount of teenage suicide, increasing isolation, and a decrease in creativity and freedom of thought. Unfortunately, it takes something that devastating to shake us up and look at teaching our pupils in a different way.

Alan: *But fortunately, we do have some wonderful alternatives available.*

Libyan: Yes, we do, and they are very effective alternatives, very solidly based. It's the combination of neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and instructional design. It involves training teachers, creating curriculum, and developing material. It involves bringing together administration, teachers, and parents. And if we continue to create all of these nice triangles, I think we'll end up with a geodesic dome - something very stable and very beautiful.