



The History of Sleep Learning

It should come as no surprise that science fiction writers were among the first to make use of modern sleep learning. In its June 1911 issue, **Modern Electronics**, the world's first radio magazine, boasting a circulation approaching 100,000, carried an instalment of a science fiction story by Hugo Gernsback, titled "Ralph 124C 41+." The instalment dealt with a wondrous device called the hypnobioscope; an instrument that enabled people to learn while they slept. Here the author describes its use:

"Before he fell asleep he attached to his head a double leather headband with metal temple plates...

"He then called his faithful butler, and told him 'put on Homer's Odyssey for the night.'

"All books are read while one sleeps. Most of the studying is done while one sleeps. Some people have mastered ten languages, which they learned during their sleep-life."

Gernsback described the instruments used for learning while asleep in this way:

"... at each end of the (head) band was attached a round metal disc which pressed closely on the temples. From each metal disc an insulated wire led to a small square box, the monograph, or mind-writer. When the start button for the monograph was depressed, immediately a wave line, traced in ink, appeared on a narrow white fabric band."

The monograph described by the author was a primitive description of the electroencephalograph (EEG) used today for sleep-related research. The EEG didn't come into existence until seventeen years later, when it was introduced by a German physiologist, Hans Berger.

Twelve years after the appearance of "Ralph 124C 41 +," another magazine, **Radio News**, suggested that what had been perceived as fantasy might in fact be true. The magazine referred to the earlier Gernsback story and related an incident in which the sleep learning theory had actually been tested. According to the article, United States Navy Chief J. N. Phinney claimed to have tried sleep learning on several student sailors at a Pensacola, Florida, training centre. He got the idea from an article in the December 1921 issue of **Science and Invention** that mentioned the possibility of learning while asleep.

Phinney said he used sleep learning in December 1922 to see if it would help his students learn the Morse code faster. The Navy instructor claimed remarkable success in this first recorded sleep learning experiment. He reported that the performance of fifteen of the seventeen volunteer sleep learners improved after the nocturnal lessons.

Sleep learning gained a wider audience and a new name in the early 1930s with the publication of Aldous Huxley's **Brave New World**. In his futuristic book, Huxley's imaginary world government used sleep learning, or hypnopaedia, as he called it, for "normal education" and to prepare children for the lifestyle they would live within their pre-selected class of society.

For a description of how Huxley envisioned a world state might use sleep learning, we join the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning as he tours the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre with a newly arrived group of students.

"Fifty yards of tiptoeing brought them to a door which the director cautiously opened. They stepped over the threshold into the twilight of a shuttered dormitory. Eighty cots stood in a row against the wall. There was a sound of light regular breathing and a continuous murmur, as of very faint voices remotely whispering.

"A nurse rose as they entered and came to attention before the Director.

"What's the lesson this afternoon?" he asked. 'We had Elementary Sex for the first forty minutes,' she answered. 'But now it's switched over to Elementary Class Consciousness.'

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"The Director walked slowly down the long line of cots. Rosy and relaxed with sleep, eighty little boys and girls lay softly breathing. There was a whisper under every pillow. The D.H.C. halted and, bending over one of the little beds, listened attentively."

What the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning listened to was a portion of the Elementary Class Consciousness lesson. It was this lesson that first attached a connotation of "brainwashing" to sleep learning. How this happened is easily understood by the content of the lesson.

"Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do, because they're so frightfully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better man the Gammas and Deltas.

"Gammas are stupid. They all wear green, and Delta children wear Khaki. Oh no, I don't want to play with the Delta children. And Epsilons are still worse. They're too stupid to be able to read and write. Besides they wear black, which is a beastly colour. I'm so glad I'm a Beta."

According to the Director, the sleeping children would hear that lesson between forty and fifty times before they were awakened. Then they could progress to a more advanced lesson. He called sleep learning the "greatest moralizing and socializing force of all time."

A man with a wide range of interests and knowledge, Huxley's interest in sleep learning (or hypnopaedia) never wavered. Over a quarter of a century after the publication of **Brave New World**, he wrote on the subject again. He devoted an entire chapter of his 1958 book, **Brave New World Revisited**, to sleep learning.

This time, Huxley was concerned about the use of sleep learning at a penal institution in California. He was referring to reports that sleep learning was being tested as a means to alter the behavioural patterns of prison inmates. According to these reports, several inmates had volunteered for a program consisting of nightly pre-recorded lessons intended to instil in them a desire to turn their backs on crime and lead virtuous lives.

Huxley's concern wasn't with the intent of the messages. "No, it is not the message conveyed by the inspirational whisper that one objects to, it is the principle of sleep teaching by governmental agencies. Is hypnopaedia the sort of instrument that officials ought to be allowed to use at their discretion?" The man who first introduced the term **hypnopaedia** to the general public had reason to be concerned. The use of sleep learning, for moralistic purposes sounded too much like an early stage of the "Suggestions from the State," as the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning called the Elementary Class Consciousness lessons.

Despite reservations about the possible misuse of sleep learning, Aldous Huxley believed the technique could have beneficial applications aside from simply learning. In a letter to his friend, Dr. Humphrey Osmond, Huxley expressed a strong feeling that suggestions made during sleep might be a successful therapy in the treatment of mentally ill patients.

A few years later, Huxley explained how he believed sleep learning worked and how it might aid those suffering from illness.

He believed that verbal suggestions made to a sleeping person enter the brain through the cortex and find their way to the nervous system. He firmly advocated that the bodily functions of a sleeper could be altered if these suggestions made during sleep were repeated often enough and they were conceived properly.

Four and a half years later, Huxley again proposed the use of sleep learning to help in the cure of mental illness. He urged that a process of chemical hibernation of cancer patients be accompanied by suggestions during sleep. His interest in sleep learning for therapeutic applications was quite natural, since Huxley was not only a novelist, but a medical doctor as well.

Although we must credit fiction writers with awakening interest in sleep learning, the concept is actually much older than we might suspect. Several ancient civilizations constructed temples in which followers would periodically come to sleep. Researchers have expressed the belief that the priests of these temples would silently move among the sleeping faithful and whispers religious instructions in their ears.

A leading sleep learning researcher, Professor of Psychiatry A.M. Svyadoshch of the Karaganda State Medical Institute in the U.S.S.R., reports the early use of sleep learning in three countries. According to Svyadoshch, Vetterstrand in Germany in 1893, N. V. Viazemskii in Russia in 1903, and France's Burdon in 1904 all used some form of suggestion during sleep on their patients. Science fiction stories using sleep learning methods, including several by Russian authors, were instrumental in interesting Svyadoshch himself in the subject.

In the post World War II period, extraordinary reports based mostly on unsubstantiated claims of sleep learning success appeared. This sensationalism was in part responsible for the cautious approach to publicity taken by many researchers who worked with sleep learning during the following decades. Along with these exaggerated reports, primitive sleep learning equipment made its appearance in the marketplace.

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The year 1947 saw the birth of what grew in eleven years to become a ten-million-dollar industry. By 1958, the sleep learning equipment business was in full swing and many of the claims made by its salesmen grew increasingly outlandish.

Early in 1958, the industry drew the attention of the **Wall Street Journal**, resulting in a front-page article on the sleep learning industry. The article, written by a **Journal** staff reporter, repeated some of the claims made by those who were in the business of selling equipment. Most notable of these was that "well over 100,000 people in the United States were successfully using sleep learning." Reference was also made to a two-year investigation of the industry by the Federal Trade Commission. A recent search of the files of the Commission was unable to uncover any information concerning such an investigation.

Another claim was that several U.S. corporations were using sleep learning to train salesmen. The list of companies included the Chrysler Corporation. In an effort to substantiate this, Mario S. Gorbin, the manager of Dealer Relations and Marketing Training for Chrysler was questioned. Mr. Gorbin, who had been associated with Chrysler's dealer sales training program since 1953, told he had no knowledge of sleep learning ever being used. He did say the company once looked into some of the claims made by its advocates, but that was as far as they had gone.

Defining Sleep Learning

The obvious question asked about sleep learning is, "How does it work?" To help us understand how it works, we need a precise definition of exactly what sleep learning is. This requires a clarification of terms. The method of learning during sleep is called either sleep learning or hypnopaedia, depending on the speaker or writer. The terms are interchangeable. The use of hypnopaedia as a scientific or technical name for sleep learning is a direct reflection of Aldous Huxley's influence on the subject.

The techniques of sleep learning actually apply to acquiring knowledge in **two distinct states: total sleep, and deep relaxation**. The latter is that state of semi-consciousness just before falling asleep. However, for simplification, we will call learning in both states sleep learning. Only when we are discussing deep relaxation exclusively will that term be used.

As a subject for scientific research, sleep learning reaches into areas in which we have limited knowledge and which create controversy among researchers. While some believe it has universal applications and can be used by the general population, others maintain it needs further research and refinement before people are encouraged to learn while they sleep.

Dr. Ernst Schmidhofer, who has used sleep learning techniques extensively since World War II, thinks the typical researcher's opinion on sleep learning is based less on the results of scientific experiments and more on personal preconceived bias that influences the methods used in conducting experiments. Many sleep learning project methods appear aimed at disproving the validity of sleep learning instead of the other way around. Scientific research should be of a positive nature, seeking to prove the existence of unrealized human potentials, not seeking to disprove what has already been established.

When people participate in sleep learning sessions, they are usually asleep in their beds while a tape recorder or other similar instrument is playing a selected lesson. For some, this suggests an image of brainwashing much like that described in Aldous Huxley's book. But real brainwashing techniques have nothing to do with sleep learning. Brainwashing is trying to force-feed information that might otherwise be rejected. To work, brainwashing needs a confused, irrational victim, and the best way to make him that way is to deprive him of sleep. While the sleep learner is nicely tucked away in bed engaged in learning something she desires to learn, the brainwashing victim is denied sleep. The brainwashers may force their victim to stand on his feet or walk around in his brightly illuminated cell for endless days. By doing this, they hope to confuse him enough to eradicate his previously learned views and patterns of behaviour, which can be replaced with views and patterns of their own creation.

Learning while asleep requires certain psychological conditioning that only the sleep learner can create. No one can force you to learn anything while asleep. **The successful sleep learner must have a genuine desire to learn the material.**

Another common misconception about sleep learning is that it is akin to suggestions made to a subject under hypnosis. Unfortunately, the term **hypnopaedia** lends itself to association with hypnosis. Such a relationship might exist if the hypnotic, trance-like state was related to sleep, but it isn't. One researcher who examined the results of numerous experiments measuring the brain activity of sleeping and hypnotized individuals found no conclusive relationship in the brain activity patterns of the two groups. **In fact, he concluded the EEG patterns of hypnotized people more closely resembled those of a person who was wide awake instead of one who was asleep.**

For a complete professional description of sleep learning, we turn to leading Soviet sleep learning researcher, Professor Leonid A. Bliznitchenko, Director of the Department of Experimental Phonetics at the Potebni Institute of Linguistics:

"Sleep learning is a process that takes place during natural sleep. It consists of introducing into the human mind

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information which is processed and memorized while the student is asleep. The sleep learning lesson begins while the student is in deep relaxation and continues after the onset of sleep."

Sleep learning uses the functions of learning, memory, and sleep. All three continue to present scientists with unanswered questions. To understand how sleep learning works, we must examine what we know about them and how they apply to sleep learning. To do this, we need to review what we know about the human subconscious. Understanding the subconscious and the powers it makes available to us will help us understand sleep learning, because sleep learning is based on teaching our subconscious mind instead of our conscious mind.

There is also much we need to know about sleep itself. We need to understand how it is possible to hear things while we sleep, and the role of dreams in the processing or memorizing of information. We should know why learning and memory are not only related to sleep and dreams, but might not exist without them. As you learn more about these subjects and how they relate to sleep learning, your capacity to learn successfully in your sleep will be greatly improved.

After you have acquired a basic knowledge of the four components of sleep learning—sleep, the subconscious, learning, and memory - we will bring them together just as sleep learning does to form a viable learning program.

Only by understanding the powers of the subconscious and the capabilities of our minds while we sleep can we recognize that sleep learning is not what some have called a "revolutionary new method of learning," but simply a way of using abilities that are inherent in each of us.

Francis Bacon wrote that 'knowledge itself is power.'" When it comes to sleep learning, knowledge of the human functions and the processes by which we are able to learn while asleep are even more important than power. Knowledge can mean the difference between successful sleep learning and failure. The following chapters provide the knowledge required for successful sleep learning.

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