

## “The Right Stuff”-- If Only It Were that Simple

### Second Draft Expanded by Research

The following connects to pp. 218-21 of *Acting on Words*. Pages 218-19 present a critique of “The Right Stuff” written by Lee Jennings under examination-style restrictions. Jennings had only two hours to read the essay and develop his critique. With no access to research sources, he could not check information and had to rely on first-hand experience. Following is Lee Jennings’s second draft, expanded by research and further thinking based upon that research. It contains editorial footnotes that we have added, but ignore these upon your first reading of the essay. Note how Jennings’ style adapts to serve the increased findings of his inquiry and more formal academic purpose. Ignoring our footnotes, compare this second draft to the first one in *Acting on Words* and find as many changes, cuts, research supports, and additions as you can. Then read our footnotes and see our commentary and study questions, which follow the essay.

“The Right Stuff”-- If Only It Were that Simple

[Second Draft Expanded by Research]

Lee Jennings

David Suzuki’s “The Right Stuff” features the gracious, entertaining and informative style we have come to associate with this well-known host of *The Nature of Things*. He begins with an interesting speculation that “impressions formed in high school are more vivid and indelible than those formed at any other time in life.” Supporting this idea by a study reported in the book *Is There Life After High School?*, Suzuki stresses the importance of high school education and prepares his reader for a proposal related to making that education as valuable as possible. But the essay fails to support its thesis that high school science courses should begin with sex education, because Suzuki spends too long on one personal anecdote and ignores or, at best, sweeps aside counterarguments.

Almost half of this seven-paragraph essay describes a trip Suzuki made to a certain high school in a “tough” northern town where he was to address 400 students in the school auditorium. Having dropped into the motel bar the night before his address, Suzuki was approached by the school science teacher, a prophet of doom, who predicted the so-called sex-crazed students would “tear [Suzuki] apart.”<sup>1</sup> The next day Suzuki greeted his young audience with the comment, “I’m a geneticist. I know you’re basically walking gonads, so I’m going to talk about sex.” The audience was hooked, and a lengthy, productive discussion of science emerged from this departure point. But Suzuki commits the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* by assuming that his remark caused this reaction.<sup>2</sup> The reaction could have been caused by his charisma and celebrity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, certain students might have been privately disturbed by his directness: one observer cannot determine how 400 students are responding on deeper levels.

This flaw of oversimplification weakens Suzuki’s essay in general. Beginning a talk with a good-natured joke about sexuality is not the same as giving a class in sex education. Suzuki had no evidence that the students would have welcomed or needed a sex education talk in order to follow to the next points he discussed. Other examples of hasty conclusions can certainly be found. Suzuki, for instance, assumes that the hormonal changes of puberty inevitably disrupt high school students, causing their preoccupation with sex. This idea was proposed by G. Stanley Hall in his 1904 work *Adolescence*, the first twentieth century discussion of adolescence as a distinctive period of intense change caused by biology and chemistry. However, Hall’s ideas have been widely challenged and dismissed.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note on style: The square editor’s brackets indicate that Jennings has adapted the sentence, as written in the original, to fit the grammar of his sentence: he has changed the original word “me” to “Suzuki.” The reader realizes that an altered word occurs within the brackets, purely for grammatical reasons. The original, using first person, uses “me” for the writer, Suzuki

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: See Logical Fallacy 5, Chapter 3, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Editor’s note: Jennings has found scholarly support for his initial concern that one shouldn’t assume teenage behaviour is caused by hormones

Sociology Central, an educational web site of the United Kingdom national grid for learning, reports that “most sociologists tend to agree that the idea of ‘youth’ is itself a relatively modern phenomenon—one that is characteristic of advanced industrial societies with well-developed education systems (1).” This web site goes on to observe that while it is clear that chemical changes do occur during adolescence, “the degree to which they affect social behaviour appears to be culturally determined (3).” Studies of contemporary non-industrial societies, like the Piraha or Oro Win of the Amazon rain forest, surely demonstrate, by comparison, that much adolescent behaviour in our society is socially determined.

Perhaps the best demonstration that Suzuki concludes too hastily on the topic of causality comes from Suzuki himself.<sup>4</sup> In another of his essays, “Ancestors—the Genetic Source,” Suzuki makes the point that “the overriding influence [on human behaviour] is environmental (14).” In “The Right Stuff” he appears to overlook not only the many critics of G. Stanley Hall but also himself. The arguments in favour of cultural and social explanations of behaviour may not discredit Suzuki’s point that sex is on the minds of many high school students, but these arguments do question whether it is there as he suggests, as a result of a “blast of hormones.”

In another hasty conclusion, Suzuki states that opponents of sex education in the schools have no intention of tutoring their children at home. He provides no empirical data to support this claim. Nor does he question why this reluctance may exist, if it does. Perhaps there are ways to deal with the barriers parents encounter to educating their children about sex; and if those barriers are difficult to remove, are they any more so than those faced by the schools?

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<sup>4</sup> Editor’s note: Jennings has found another essay by Suzuki taking an opposite view on the nature-nurture debate; in other words, Jennings has found Suzuki contradicting himself

The major question overlooked by Suzuki's essay—one of logistics-- is how can the schools, understaffed and overstressed, add the difficult subject of sex education to their curriculum. This oversight, as suggested above, seems to be partly because Suzuki has not considered the difficulties this area of education raises for many students. Dr. Marjorie Chan, principal of Westridge Junior High in Balmore, East Compton, points to the growing number of studies revealing considerable numbers of students who are troubled by histories of sexual abuse or other related concerns. "Students need not have had disturbing experiences with sex," she adds, "to find sex education classes uncomfortable." Dr. Chan goes on to say that "highly expert" staff is needed to handle the organizing, facilitating, and public relations required by a program of in-school sex education. Her teachers have discussed the idea of dealing with sex education but concluded that they are untrained for the job as well as too pressured by other work. Furthermore, Dr. Chan's operating budget from the provincial government for the coming year has received another significant cut and increased restrictions; for example, each class will be permitted only two field trips, and any special in-class visit or presentation will be defined as a "field trip." Says Dr. Chan, "We are barely treading water."<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, David Suzuki wrote his essay at a time when education budgets were in better shape than they are today, and he certainly makes an excellent point that educators should respect their students and appeal to their interests. Nevertheless, his argument for sex education in the schools clearly needs further thinking.

#### Works Cited

Chan, Marjorie. Personal Interview. Edmonton. 20 August 2003.

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<sup>5</sup> Editor's note: In this paragraph, Jennings uses the support of his interview with a school principal

“Deviance—Youth Subculture.” First-year Lecture Notes Posted by Sociology Central on the UK National Grid for Learning. 1 – 10. 28 August 2003.

<http://www.sociology.org.uk/devy1.pdf>

Suzuki, David. “Ancestors—the Genetic Source.” In *Metamorphosis: Stages in a Life*. Toronto: Stoddart. 1987. 13 – 17.

### ***Word Count***

The computer word count for this essay is 963 words, around 240 words a page over four pages. Since the average count per full page of double spacing is around 260 words (as counted by the computer), the above sample essay represents a good length for this assignment. The first page would start a quarter of the way down, and the final page would end a few lines before the bottom.

### ***Focus Questions***

1. Have the arguments in this analysis changed any of your initial thinking about Suzuki’s essay? Explain.
2. Has Jennings considered the audience Suzuki was writing for? Would considering audience change the direction of the evaluation? Explain.
3. What level of persuasion do you think Suzuki is aiming for in his essay, and why? In other words, is he aiming to change awareness, change thinking, or change behaviour?
4. In what way is question 2 above related to question 3? Explain.

Discuss your answers to all of these questions with your course-mates and instructor.

## Commentary on Lee Jennings's Revised Critical Response Using Research

The main step forward in Jennings' revised speech is that he has now tested his preliminary response and thereby discovered other examples and reasoning to modify and expand his own. He has pursued his original focus on responding to Suzuki's arguments as opposed to the author's rhetorical methods, without however overlooking the latter as standards involved in assessing the quality of argument.

The opening paragraph has been expanded for a smoother, more informed transition to the writer's direct-list thesis statement (see Chapter 6). The writer, with more room available, has added another example of oversimplification, observing that a good-natured joke about sexuality cannot be implicitly compared to a class in sex education. The first major revision, however, occurs with the use of research: the student points out that Suzuki repeats the circa 1900 thinking of G. Stanley Hall by connecting adolescence to chemical change. Jennings goes on to note, from his research, that this idea has long been discredited. Adding to this, Jennings discovered through additional reading that Suzuki himself, in another essay, has favoured the nurture side of the debate over causes of human behaviour. Again through further reading, Jennings encountered examples of non-industrial contemporary societies that do not reflect the adolescent behavioural patterns of ours, thus adding to the counterargument that behaviour is culturally and socially conditioned. Jennings chooses not to cite specific studies of these societies, but naming the societies helps to specify the sort of comparison the student wishes to make. These various references do build the student's case that Suzuki has come to some hasty conclusions.

Also note that Jennings has dropped the following first-draft statement: "... one might as well argue that social conditioning, fed by TV, video games, Internet and the like—all heavily infused with appeals to sexual desire-- influence teenage restlessness." In consulting the Sociology Central web site, Jennings found a caution that this sort of assumption about influences on youth is questioned in much of the recent scholarly

literature. Advancing this point does not significantly serve the critique of “The Right Stuff,” and since length is restricted to four pages, the student wisely decided to drop this unnecessary point, or at least to set it aside for further research and debate in another paper on the topic of media influence.

Now that Jennings is bolstering his counterarguments through research, first person references become redundant and even distracting, so, wisely, he removes first person. Instead of casual, unnamed sources (“the high school staff I know”), Jennings substitutes a far stronger interview with an identified school principal. This source provides solid, authoritative support to the student’s climactic point stressing the impracticality of Suzuki’s proposal. If this section included a formal survey of school principals tested for significance by statistical methods (after all, Jennings might have selected the one he knew would agree with him), its support would be all the stronger.

Note that the body of the critique uses fully developed, focused paragraphs matched to the reasons given in the thesis and organized to build effectively to the final climactic objection (see Chapter 6 on linking body paragraphs to thesis statement; see Chapter 8 on various patterns of organization). The second paragraph elaborates on the anecdote and explains its shortcoming. From this paragraph flows the problem of oversimplification: the following paragraphs offer further cases of this central problem. Since following the guidelines for the second draft essay increased the essay’s stipulated length, Jennings slightly expands his conclusion but decides against an exhaustive one (see Chapter 4 for advice on concluding paragraphs and Chapter 7 on concluding essays). Through the added stages of research, testing, and revision, Jennings has given his response a more suitable analytical tone and enhanced authority (see Chapter 1 on ethos developed by formal attention to logos).