

# IN MEMORIAM

Susan Meyer Markle (1928 – 2008)



## FRED NICKOLS

I recently had occasion to obtain a copy of the first edition of Susan Meyer Markle's *Good Frames and Bad: A Grammar of Frame Writing*. Her book figured prominently in my work when I ran the Navy's programmed instruction writer's course back in 1969–1970, and I long ago lost or misplaced my original copy. When the book arrived, I was delighted and prompted to wonder what Susan was up to these days. To my dismay, I learned she had passed away on December 19, 2008. Even more dismaying was that I hadn't been aware of it. As it turns out, several others—all key figures in the National Society for Programmed Instruction/International Society for Performance Improvement (NSPI/ISPI)—did not know of Susan's passing either. And so, I resolved to put together a memorial for Susan Meyer Markle. After all, she was a truly important figure in this organization's early days and she profoundly influenced many of its most prominent figures.

Susan Meyer Markle, as we knew her, was born Susan Rogers on November 11, 1928, daughter of Alden and Ruth Rogers. Her first two marriages, to Arthur Meyer and David Markle, gave her the name most of us knew her by. Her third marriage, to Phil Tiemann, led some of us to refer to her as Susan Meyer Markle Tiemann. As another person contributing to this memorial will point out, Susan had something to say about those names.

I knew Susan primarily through her NSPI days and I had a few occasions to interact with her while I was working in the Chicago area immediately after retiring from the Navy in 1974. She was spirited, highly intelligent, and brooked no nonsense. Along with some other local chapter members, I once visited with her in her Chicago apartment, where she informed me that she had a high opinion of my capabilities and my future. I have never been prouder of anything in my life.

What Susan wrote about developing instruction—although in the context of programmed instruction (she preferred one *m*)—still stands today as sound advice to

instructional developers. Who knows? Given the capability of the web to support programmed instruction in ways we could not imagine in the paper-and-pencil days, perhaps we will see a resurgence of programmed instruction on the web, and along with that will come a resurgence of interest in what Susan Meyer Markle had to say.

Here, then, are what others have to say in memory of Susan. They include Roger M. Addison, Dale M. Brethower, Joe Harless, Paul Harmon, Roger Kaufman, Eileen and Robert F. Mager, Margo Murray, Judy (Springer) Steele, Sivasailam (Thiagi) Thiagarajan, and Donald Tosti.

## ROGER M. ADDISON

The last time I saw Susan Markle was in Chicago. She stopped by to wish me well when I became president of ISPI. I had met Dr. Markle at an NSPI conference in the late 1960s with Lloyd Homme, Jim Evans, and Tom Gilbert. At 19, I must say I was quite awed by all of them. They were great friends. Susan and the others were heroes to me. One of the first books I read was *Good Frames and Bad: A Grammar of Frame Writing*, and I still have a copy. Much of my early learning experience was shaped and influenced by her thinking and ideas. I truly miss the days when the heroes of NSPI/ISPI were presenting their ideas and moving our thinking forward. Susan was among the best of them.

## DALE M. BRETHER

Susan Meyer (later Markle) was an unforgettable presence in Pigeon Staff meetings at Harvard in the late 1950s. Pigeon Staff meetings were held on Friday afternoons in the Psychology Department conference room. Twenty or so psychologists would gather around the conference table to examine recently collected data. Data unfurled on the conference table on long rolls of white paper just as it rolled out from Gerbrands recorders. Everyone gathered around to examine the un-retouched data.

The Harvard Psych Department was usually represented by graduate students such as George Reynolds, Charles Catania, and Herb Terrace, and faculty members B. F. Skinner, Richard Herrnstein, Jim Holland, and Lewis Gollub. Peter Dews, Bill Morse, Susan, and many other psychologists from the area attended frequently. Data were often from the Psych Department Pigeon Lab, hence the “Pigeon Staff” designation.

Once when Susan was the presenter, her data were on a long computer printout, which she unfurled with a flair. Everyone appreciated both the gesture and the wit. She knew that data are data. I relate the story because as a first-year grad student from the Midwest, I was still a bit intimidated by the Harvard atmosphere, but Susan was not. She was never intimidated by authority or ignorance, even in high places.

She became well known, later, for the quality of her work, her incisive analysis, and her quick wit. Her book, *Good Frames and Bad*, was one of the best publications in programmed instruction. It showed both good and bad frames to illustrate principles of learning and programmed instruction. The same principles later became the hallmark of the programmed learning workshops at the University of Michigan and exemplified in *Programmed Learning: A Practicum* authored by Brethower, Markle, Rummler, Schrader, and Smith. (The Markle was not Susan but David, Susan’s second husband.)

Many years later, having earned an excellent and thoroughly well-deserved reputation in the field of performance improvement/programmed learning, she was asked to offer advice to others in the field, especially to young women. “Always publish under your maiden name!” was the advice. She had developed a solid professional reputation, first as “Susan Meyer” and then again as “Susan Markle.” Because no one had told her to “Always publish under your maiden name!” she was unable to follow the sage advice herself. I am grateful to Phil Tiemann, her third husband, for supporting her decision to stop confusing the professional world with a new name every time she found a new husband. (I never knew her maiden name.) As far as I know, she was good at every other thing that she tried.

## JOE HARLESS

It is with great sadness that I learned of Sue’s passing. She was an early hero of mine, and later a highly valued colleague working with us at the Harless Performance Guild. Even though we are about larger issues than programmed instruction nowadays, I think every performance technologist should read her *Good Frames and*

*Bad*. I learned much from Sue, including how to make a killer martini and the grilling of a perfect filet mignon.

Susan also had a sharp wit: At her legendary apartment high above Chicago one evening, Tom Gilbert declared himself “The Father of the Educational Revolution.” Without missing a beat Sue said: “Well, I guess that makes Harless the bastard son and me the Grandmother of the Educational Revolution.”

## PAUL HARMON

I joined NSPI in 1967, the same year I took my first course in programmed instruction at the University of Michigan. Susan’s book, *Good Frames and Bad*, was one of the few books that Geary Rummler told us we should read if we were serious about becoming good instructional technologists. I read it, and for the next several years it was one of the few books I kept in my office.

I can remember going to my first NSPI meeting the following year in San Antonio, Texas, and meeting Ms. Markle for the first time, and thinking what a great organization NSPI was that it could bring together such interesting people. Later still, working at Praxis, Geary Rummler, Tom Gilbert, and I had long debates on what the proper size a frame should be. Markle, following Skinner, had argued that a frame should be only a few words. As we began to explore Gilbert’s ideas about the different functions of different parts of a lesson plan, we began to believe that a good frame for a human, especially an educated human expert, might be quite different than a good frame for a pigeon or a young child. These arguments all seem far removed for our concerns today. They were from a different era, when we still hoped we could revolutionize education and make the design of training much more precise. Those dreams may have faded, but the memory of Susan Meyer Markle and *Good Frames and Bad* hasn’t. She helped to define our practice and established rules I still remember. “Don’t prompt!” still comes to mind whenever I sit down to write a question of any kind.

## ROGER KAUFMAN

Susan was a great person and an outstanding professional. When we first met, I was with the “enemy” as I was working with U.S. Industries and the hated branching Auto tutor (which foreshadowed computer assisted instruction). And the one *m* or two was the argument of the day. Stubbornly, I still use two *m*’s.

Susan was a tough-minded researcher, who continued her personal quest for useful answers. She was also a hell

of a lot of fun. One evening, I was with Susan, my wife Jan, and Gabe Ofeish when we decided to go get an adult beverage. The bar would not let Jan in (she had left her ID in the hotel room) and even though Gabe announced he would vouch for her as a “colonel in the United States Air Force,” we did without drinks but had a great time solving the problems of the world and how to create measurable learning and competence.

Her work was fundamental, clear, and focused. Her contributions to us all are legion and endure the test of time. She helped make ISPI credible as well as our field.

Many who understand the crucial nature of research-based information already miss her.

## EILEEN MAGER

I met Dr. Susan M. Markle in the early 1970s, when the Chicago Chapter of what was then called “NSPI” was new, and I was about equally new to the field. Within a couple of years, she and Phil Tiemann and a couple of others had decided it was my turn to be president of the chapter, a position I held for a few years.

This turned out to be a golden opportunity to get to know Sue and to learn quite a bit from her. Her clear-headedness about teaching so that students actually learned and could do whatever they’d been taught on their own after the teaching was over was an inspiration to me. Further, it gave me a backbone that came in handy when arguing with those whose notion of fine teaching was in the “spray and pray” mode. Sue practiced what she preached.

We shared a fondness for playing with words, which sometimes turned into satirical songs. One of hers used the old hymn tune, “Bringing in the Sheaves.” Her lyrics? “Filling in the blanks”—a wickedly funny song about how programmed instruction could be, and often was, done wrong.

We also shared a love of jazz. Sue was a jazz fan who knew just about every great jazz musician I had ever heard of, and whose knowledge of jazz—its history, what it was about, how it should be played and sung—was encyclopedic. She was also quite something on the dance floor.

So thanks, Sue, for the example you set, for the laughs we shared, for the music we enjoyed, and for launching so many of us as successful practitioners in the field of performance and instruction. We won’t forget you, and can’t think of a single reason why anyone would ever want to.

## ROBERT F. MAGER

Sue Markle and I were active NSPI members during the earliest days of its history (early 1960s), years during

which we had many opportunities to interact. This was especially so during our tenures as NSPI president and vice president (1965–1966), after which Sue was crowned the first woman president for the year following (1966–1967).

These were the heydays of programmed instruction, you may recall, when the society was actually focused on instruction. It was an exciting time during which we eagerly explored the revelation that instruction could systematically be developed and delivered in ways that allowed us to guarantee its effectiveness.

Sue was seriously involved in advancing that technology. But not only as a spectator. She stood head and shoulders among most others, in part, because her dissatisfaction with merely talking about programmed instruction motivated her to actually dig her hands and mind into the process of creating programs that worked. Most others were content to talk about it, write about it, and pontificate about it. This worthy characteristic made her a member of a very small club.

Even so, like most bright people, Sue was multidimensional. In addition to her well-known addiction to jazz, she delighted in sparring about earth-shaking issues, such as whether the word “programming” should be spelled with one *m* (and therefore pronounced pro-gray-ming), or two. We sometimes wondered what she did with all her leftover *m*’s. But her whimsical side burst forth loud and clear when, in 1966, she published:

The Compleat Programer  
*Being a Compendium of a Definitive Glossary  
Exemplary Programs  
and  
Assorted Papers for the Edification of Practitioners*

This collection of farce and silliness proved she was comfortable enough with herself and her achievements to poke fun at the craft to which she contributed so much.

Susan taught us much, and was truly a joy to know. We miss her.

## MARGO MURRAY

When appointed by Pacific Telephone Company to set up a performance improvement group in 1965, I began to search for resources. Dr. Richard Peterson, on contract with AT&T from American Institutes for Research, recommended I get involved with NSPI and suggested several publications including *Good Frames and Bad*, by Susan Meyer Markle.

In April 1966, I arrived in St. Louis to attend my first NSPI conference. I had met Bill Deterline and Peter Pipe in the van en route from the airport to the hotel.

Later that evening, I was stopped by Bill in the hallway and was invited to meet the NSPI Board members who were taking a break from their meeting: Glen Valentine, Robert Filep, Bob Mager, and Susan all welcomed me in. I told Susan how helpful her book was in our projects of designing “self-paced learning” for telephone operators, business office representatives, and line assigners. Susan encouraged me to contact her if she could help our group—typically generous with time, as most NSPI leaders were, and continue to be.

Later, I had a different question for Sue, who with Phil Tiemann hosted a meal for the Board members in their lovely home high in that building on Lake Michigan. What did they do with their garbage from 50 floors up? Susan had a great laugh about that naïve question.

As others have recognized, Susan was a great role model for leadership in ISPI. I am grateful that she left that legacy of outstanding work, fun at play, and passing it on!

## JUDY (SPRINGER) STEELE

When I was new in the field and attended my first NSPI conference in the early 60s, I was paying attention to everybody who was prominent at that time, but I particularly noticed Susan. I was very impressed by her presence, her intelligence, and her accomplishments, and, of course, by the fact that she was a woman. Most important, she also seemed to be having fun. On the bus to some conference event, I remember seeing her sitting on Phil Tiemann’s lap and laughing—not exactly the kind of behavior usually associated with female academics at professional conferences. I took her as a model for myself: accomplish a lot, and have fun, too.

Years later, sometime in the 70s after I had the Athena Corporation up and running, there was a gathering at Joe and Carol Harless’ home and Susan was there. I took the opportunity to tell her how much I admired her and that she had been a model for me. She immediately responded that she was very impressed by what I had accomplished, that she had never gotten a real business going as I had, and she didn’t think she knew how to do that. Amazing to learn that each of us had been admiring the other!

I knew that jazz was very important to her and that she spent a lot of time listening to jazz groups on Rush St. in Chicago. Much later, when I became aware that she had known Duke Ellington quite well and that she had been a part of the group that surrounded him, I was even more impressed that she had kept both her scholarly career and her passion for jazz active throughout her life. Way to go, Susan!

## SIVASAILAM THIAGARAJAN

The reason I am in the field of instructional design is because of Susan Markle. The reason I am in the United States is because of Susan Markle.

As a brash young high school teacher in the mid-60s in India, I bought a copy of Susan’s book, *Good Frames and Bad*, memorized it, and applied it. Educational researchers noticed my programmed instruction (PI) materials and I was nominated to a workshop on the topic. The first day in the workshop, Susan, who was the workshop leader, looked at some of the stuff I had developed earlier and told me, “I can’t train you in PI because you know too much. So let me be your SME [subject matter expert].” For the application assignment, I chose to work on sex education and contraception. Susan got me a copy of Masters and Johnson through the diplomatic pouch (the book was not available in India) and acted as a wonderful SME and taught me a lot more about the ID process.

That was how great an influence Susan Markle was in my life. Later, when I got to the United States as a graduate student in Bloomington, Indiana, she invited my family to visit her in her wonderful North Lake Shore apartment in Chicago. She fed us vegetarian food and took me to her office at the university and we talked more about NSPI. She became my mentor (without ever using the word) and published my articles in the *NSPI Journal* and in the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (she was an editor). She nominated me to an NSPI vice presidency and encouraged me to make presentations at the NSPI conferences.

She was a great teacher, a great SME, and a great mentor.

Dr. Markle was a friend of our family. We all miss her and pray that in her next life she will once again become the president of what is now ISPI.

## DONALD TOSTI

In the late 1950s, B. F. Skinner launched the Harvard Teaching Machine project. The people involved were Sue, Lloyd Homme, and Doug Porter. I met Sue at the first NSPI conference in San Antonio. She stood out because of her intelligence and energy. She visited us at Teaching Machines Inc. on two occasions. On one of these occasions, Lloyd, Jim Evans, Ivan Horabin, and I spent the entire day discussing behavioral ideas. It was amazingly stimulating and well lubricated with booze. We ended up in Lloyd’s pool. A year later, Sue wrote *Good Frames and Bad*. Her later writings still had echoes of her early involvement in programmed instruction.

**Editor’s Note:** The editor wishes to thank Fred Nickols and all contributors for their moving testimonials and personal, heartfelt tributes to the enduring inspiration of Susan Meyer Markle. 🌟