



The following is an excerpt from a letter by Ann Arlen to the Superintendent of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in upstate New York:

... I would like to use the advantages of the kind of half inch video equipment I use as a video artist to set up a dual purposed communications program at Bedford Hills, combining making a documentary with conducting a series of teaching workshops in video over a period of approximately three months.

The purpose of the workshop would be to teach interested inmates (and perhaps staff) how to use the equipment and then to assist them in making their own videotape productions. Owing to the nature of video, it is my belief that the benefit to the inmates would extend far beyond simply learning another skill, as I will explain below.

The aim of the documentary is to produce a realistic portrayal of the institution by means of communicating who some of the people are, both inmates and officers, whose lives are bound up with it. Naturally, it would be possible to bring a deeper understanding to the making of such a documentary by doing it in conjunction with an ongoing program such as the series of workshops. I also feel that to carry on a professional activity using video during the time period in which the workshops are being held would lend focus and a sense of purpose to the workshops. In addition, there is the possibility that portions of the tapes produced by the workshop participants could be used in the documentary, creating an unusual and multi-faceted document. As you know, I was very much impressed with the feeling that the genuine involvement of the officers with the well-being of the inmates. I feel that a documentary of the sort I would like to do would help to create a more realistic public awareness of what correctional facilities are really about. I am also very much interested in your idea of using it as part of your training program for new officers.

video in prison

The project is possible because of the special advantages of half-inch videotaping equipment . . . Immediate playback is an important advantage in teaching because it is possible to demonstrate the effects of camera techniques, inaccurate tape winding, etc. without waiting a week for developing to produce results. There is a more important advantage of immediate playback, however, one which I feel could be an important psychological by-product for participants in the workshop. Seeing oneself outside of one's own skin, either simultaneously or on immediate playback, as one can with video, must inevitably result in a growth in self-knowledge. I feel that this might be particularly beneficial to inmates who have trouble understanding themselves and their relationships to others.

An important advantage of low production cost is that there is greater freedom to experiment, which means that people learn quicker and can be more creative with video. One benefit of portability is that the equipment is not intimidating and can be taken into situations in which larger equipment would be obtrusive.

Once the workshop participants are trained to use the equipment, you might wish to use their skills to videotape sensitive discussion situations within the institution without creating the anxiety that an outsider might create.

Apart from these advantages of half-inch, there is the fact that it is seen over the same television set that brings us commercial television, and the resulting juxtaposition of the two can be quite illuminating. To continuously be exposed to material which has nothing to do with our lives, via mass media, is alienating and confusing, because its familiarity makes it SEEM real. Seeing a tape which IS about our own reality over the same television set can point up how unreal the other is. For people who have not been able to find a viable place within the society, this kind of purchase on reality could make them feel more connected with the world. There is also something about seeing yourself on television—it creates some perspective about your own importance.

(In addition to the workshops) I would also like very much to set up a "video theater" one evening per week to show the tapes we have made, plus additional tapes of interest, to anyone who wants to watch. In this way I hope to reach more people with the program and also to give the participants in the workshop the important experience of communicating to others in the institution with the tapes they have made.