What Matters Most

A Collection of Concerns

There is much passion among those who work with video and kids. You can find as many objectives and as many approaches and as many assumptions as there are places where it is happening. Everyone does it his own way. There appear to be few things in common.

In introducing this section of the issue, we want to draw some distinctions and point out some unifying themes. Among our eclectic set of articles, we shall isolate basic concerns. We will try to sift-out those deepest interests and those unique orientations that differentiate what is happening, and why it is happening.

We have pigeon-holed our contributors. And this means we are misrepresenting them because each contributor works from many concerns, not just one. But this misrepresentation -- this simplification -- will be worth it if we can provoke others to search their own work and identify their own basic concerns. It will be worth it, if people will weight their concerns against the full spectrum of alternative interests as expressed in these writings.

CONCERN: Motivation to Basic Skills

The Video Carrot
Jeff Strickler

In describing what he does, Jeff Strickler's article resonates with his respect for kids as well as for video. You can tell he is an accomplished film and video artist in addition to being an experienced teacher. Yet within his writing, Jeff exhibits a pragmatic and realistic concern that new video tools be used to turn kids on to other learning priorities. This heedfulness echoes the classrooms at PS 145 where Jeff works through Open Channel's classroom-to-cable program in Manhattan. Jeff's kids, like so many other urban youngsters, are part of a cycle of failure and frustration in acquiring reading and writing skills. Breaking that cycle becomes an important goal.

"Children want to use the medium well. As they become aware of more complex possibilities, more complex planning is required, and thus more writing."

CONCERN: Educational Technology

Don't Try to Understand Media: Know Thyself
George Gordon

As much as many may try, what is perceived as the new video movement can not be isolated from the earlier and parallel world of Educational Technology. For in the end, of course, instructional television and classroom video are co-figurative. So assumes George Gordon in an article that questions

the marriage of education and technology. His questions are tough: Who does TV work best for? What is its relation to learning? Are its economics viable? With high self-honesty, George Gordon looks at the phenomenon of visual cultism and the mystique of video; he addresses the proposition of education as entertainment; he reflects on the double-edge of change.

"Fed and spread by merchants of mass culture and pop fashion, (film and video) will inevitably die in the schoolhouse. I have over the years watched countless 'brave, innovative, forward-looking' programs of televised education die in countless schools and colleges. . ."

CONCERN: Interdisciplinary Curricula

Implications of the New Television for the Open Classroom
John Le Baron

John Le Baron is concerned with educational structures and, more specially, with the full integration of video making into the learning environment. In his article, John lists the commonly held goals of "open education" and then describes a project that meets these goals and clearly places video within an interdisciplinary and multi-skill context. As part of his doctoral work at the University of Massachusett's School of Education, John directed a program called Children's Video Theater in which elementary school students made tapes that were cable cast in the towns of Amherst and Holyoke, Massachusetts.

"Educators, as representatives of formal institutions, have not seen the potential of video for curriculum development. . . (The classroom teacher) has for too long been unaware of how video can be used to achieve learning goals, especially those which characterize the open classroom."

CONCERN: Building Community

The Great Plastic Weekly Video Magazine
Chuck Anderson

Using video to create community is a theme that runs throughout Chuck Anderson's writings and his work with kids. The Great Plastic Weekly Video Magazine, Chuck's piece that follows, is excerpted from his book, The Electric Journalist. The subject of the article is the need to extend the forum in which kids work with video. The style supports this concern; The Electric Journalist was primarily written for kids to read, although, as you will see, it is filled with good ideas for teachers. We feel you should know that the specific chapter from which this article was lifted also contained information and schematics on editing, a collection of maintenance tips and a description about "video animation." Chuck is currently working on another book called Video Power. It will be about using video to effect social change in both schools and communities.

"An important payoff in making your own video programs comes in their presentation to others in your school. . . We broadcast at different times of day, to get a wider audience and to avoid being repetitious with the same crowd."

CONCERN: Development of Creativity

The Tactics of the Truth
Irving Falk

Irving Falk's article begins on an aesthetic level and ends on a pedagogic one. Through anecdote he lays bare the objectivity myth and the mystic that video somehow, has a special handle on the truth. He warns us that while the tools of video may be new, the revelations they bring won't be. We should not expect truths, we should not want them. Irving Falk's concern is that video be used as means for developing creativity and not an end in itself.

"What the student comes up with will be a face of the truth calculated to turn his experience in upon himself for a calculated and inspirational expression of that face of the truth. For in the final analysis, the tactics of the truth lie in searching oneself with honesty and discovering the commonality of thoughts and feelings with humanity as it was and is and portends to be."

Bette Korman

CONCERN: Self-Realization

Video in a Psychiatric Context
Bob Behr

In many classrooms, video is being used to help kids achieve a measure of self-reflection and, continuing from that, of self-actualization. In his work in a psychiatric hospital with high school aged students, Bob Behr centers upon this concern. His article, rich in details and understatement, talks about the values of video production in providing team-work experiences and self-expression outlets for kids with severe psychiatric problems.

"Each student's idea for taping is an expression of the self deep inside wanting to come to the surface in some form and wanting to be accepted. . . Kids feel closer to their friends in class after having expressed ideas that might in other forms appear

too frightening, too loving, or too ambitious. Seeing others act your ideas on tape legitimizes and lends reality to what was once secret."


Mary Sheridan

CONCERN: Aesthetics

Aesthetics of the Portapak
Phillip Lopate

Teaching children to be artists is, of course, shared by most of the contributors in this issue. But to some, this concern becomes a contentious issue. It is certainly that for Phillip Lopate, a poet working with elementary aged students at Manhattan's P S 75 through the auspices of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative. Phillip's interest in dramatic activities with his kids has drawn him to the use of portable VTR systems. His interest in film aesthetics clearly heightens and sharpens his sensibilities and concerns about how video is perceived and how it should be used.

"In portapak circles, the deferral of responsibility for artistic quality is subtler (than in television.) It goes under the name of videotape as a "process,"
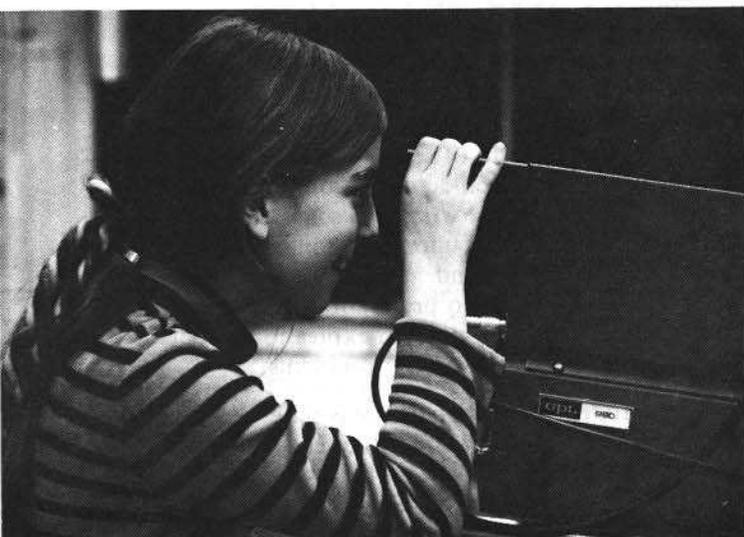
Kit Laybourne

videotape as "behavioral feedback," videotape as "the People's Medium," or videotape as "experience." All Alibis. Just many rationalizations for mediocre tapes."

CONCERN: Learning Structures

Three Propositions, Two Frameworks and an Indictment
Kit Laybourne

Another deep concern of many using video with kids involves changing the educational process. In his article, Kit Laybourne tries to systematically lay-out ways in which video and education interface. He looks at Video Studies as a new subject area and as a communications medium serving education. He describes an integrated curriculum that structures diversity and experimentation.

"We who teach media have a special thing going for us. The very discipline we are engaged in teaching provides important perceptions into how and what we should be teaching."

CONCERN: Teacher Training

Teacher and Reflecting
Joe Petner and Susan Sherwood

One of the first applications of portable VTR systems by schools was for teacher training and teacher evaluation. In North Dakota, Joe Petner and Susan Sherwood have followed this tradition. But their goals and their techniques are quite different from earlier work. They are concerned with using video in the process of helping a teacher refresh the classroom setting for himself and for the kids.

"We must begin to focus on ways of working with teachers that enables them as individuals to work through their concerns; ways that help teachers understand what is happening to children and themselves."

CONCERN: Research and Evaluation

An Attempt at Video Research
Mitch Ackerman

How well does video really work with kids? Are there better ways of teaching it? Can you prove it is valuable to administrators? Such questions distinguish a concern for evaluating video with kids. It is a concern shared by Mitch Ackerman. In his report on a research project he completed in conjunction with his Master's thesis at the University of Maryland, Mitch identifies both the goals and the difficulties many people have in attempting to measure how video affects kids.

"This study was designed to discover the differences in programs produced by structured and non-structured elementary school workshops. The results, hopefully, contribute to the systematic acquisition of information in the area of video studies and its role in our educational system."

CONCERN: Consciousness Raising

Action for Children's Television
Maggi Cowlan

No individual group interested in video and kids has had more of a national impact than ACT (Action for Children's Television.) This organization of parents, teachers and leaders in many professions is primarily concerned with changing the nature of broadcasted programming aimed at kids. On one level ACT is about consciousness raising - in the past five years they have grown from a group of four Boston mothers to a powerful advocacy organization of over 100,000. But ACT is also about making specific structural change in children's programming. Maggi Cowlan's report outlines ACT's guidelines for better TV for kids and reviews a few of the specific actions they have taken.

"To those in power ACT is saying - clearly and loudly - that new guidelines for children's programming must be adopted in which different kinds of programs are designed to meet the developmental needs of children at different age levels."

CONCERN: Information Systems

Invitation to a Video Forum
Anne Page

If you want something to happen, you do it yourself. Anne Page believes that kids should exchange the tapes they have made. In this article she offers to coordinate a Video Forum. Anne's idea is to have kids create tapes on particular issues and then to mail these through a network of places where a class or group shares the same interest. The project is initiated right here.

"I have recently been involved with a video-pal exchange between high school video classes. The results have been so rewarding that it has occurred to me that the principle of sharing tapes could be expanded. I'm willing to make this happen."

The Video Carrot

JEFF STRICKLER

Kids wiggle and shout, giggle and wave when they first see themselves on a live television monitor. After the initial blast of self-recognition they begin to pose as tough guys or movie stars or popular singers or Kung Fu experts . . . provoking laughter and imitators. It's all very self-conscious, this trying on of images, almost a seeking to discover their own importance. Soon two or three will want to do a story. . .usually a copy of adult TV. . .or a monster story . . . or a fight scene.

But this takes organization. They have to get a space for action. How do you choose a camera operator when all want to do it? Who does what first? When do I turn on the camera? A group begins to coalesce around the task of creating a story. The action is frantic with advice or heckling from the sidelines . . .and maybe a hand or head in the picture. The result is played back. They again laugh and wiggle, or hide bashfully when they see themselves. But when the playback is finished they want to do it over, do it better, with more organization and fewer shouts and hands from the side. (And if they do it over, they can prolong the experience.) Here a group of children organize themselves to realize a goal, judging their progress toward that goal by periodic replays and altering behavior to produce desired changes. They reproduce in microcosm the kind of organizational effort used in the world around them. Plan, execute, evaluate, play, execute, etc.

Levels of Organization

More than just social organization is taking place however. The original idea changes as they work on it. New ideas come up. They must be worked in or rejected. Actions must come in sequence. What comes first? Soon arguments over the interior logic

Jeff Strickler

of the story erupt. "How can you get killed and then walk home in the next scene?" The logic of the story must be preserved. . . not that it can't veer in unpredictable directions under the charged emotions of performing. After playing the tape back, they may want or need to change their old

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