

Things To Do With Kids

A Portfolio of Activities

For those who like participation games, there is a short quiz. It tries to pin you down. You are asked to assess your position upon various continuums. The seven questions match seven areas of contention that shape the Things To Do in this section.

QUIZ

1. My emphasis in teaching would be towards helping kids gain critical and creative skills for their use in understanding the impact of broadcast television in their lives.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

2. I would not find it useful to follow someone else's video studies curriculum regardless of how good I thought it was.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

3. Even if I believed that the development of specific, measurable "behavioral objectives" was inappropriate for use in teaching video, I would fashion such statements if school administration required them.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

4. In introducing kids to portapaks, I would simply set the unassembled equipment on a table and then leave the room for awhile after asking a small group of kids to try to figure

out how to assemble the equipment and then proceed to record and playback and tape.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

5. When you really come down to it, any assignment for, say, street-shooting achieves pretty much the same things as any other street-shooting activity.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

6. It is not important for kids to make tapes which are finely finished and suitable for large public showings.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

7. The only successful way to have kids learn about video is to have them do video productions.

agree 1 2 3 4 5 disagree

Something happens in a room full of teachers when the talk turns to activities. It clears the air. There is an expectation of usefulness. A "here's-what-I've-done-that-works" perspective seems to cut away the puffery of rhetoric, theory, goals, rationale, acceptance strategies and specific objectives. Discussing what to do with kids avoids tendencies for self-depreciation or boastfulness. It resolves as a given everyone's Best Attentions.

In this section you will get an opportunity to read between the lines of what others are doing with video. We hope you took the quiz. Now we'd like to ask you to measure your answers against the conflicting arguments of others. Towards this end, we are supplying a primer to some of the "heavy contentions" that you can ferret out of the activities that follow. But you'll have to look carefully - the sides people have chosen on these important issues are inexplicit.

TV vs. VT

For some teachers, working with video tools is aimed at helping kids develop an understanding and respect for the broadcast formats of conventional television. "Know your enemy," they say. "De-mystify television by doing television." We must help kids develop skills that will help them deal with their video environment." (Agreement with question 1.)

Others are primarily concerned that kids come to know the unique qualities of video as opposed to television. They hold that because the equipment is simple, inexpensive, and portable there is a clear difference between small format and studio format mediums. They say things like this: "By learning what video is you learn what television isn't." "Video has to do with Self and you'd better have kids know something about themselves before they start laying numbers on others." Or even, "VT is TV inside out." (Disagreement with question 1.)

Prescription vs. Description

This has become a classic dilemma. The issue is one of heuristics and it shows up in the way one constructs activity for the use of others.

On one side it is argued that some people may understand more about teaching video than others, that they may have had greater experience and, consequently, they have figured out the better ways to do things with kids. Further, (goes the "prescriptive" argument), there is a quality of legitimacy within canonized curricula that helps get video studies accepted in many schools. Overworked and undertrained teachers need packaged materials. Finally, to the extent that they are "teacher-proof", prescriptions of what to do help the greatest number of kids. (Disagreement with question 2.)

Here are some arguments against prescription. The climate and success of the classroom is critically affected by the degree that a teacher participates in planning the curriculum. If you work with someone else's activities you may be trying on a style of teaching with which you have no congeniality. And just who is to say what is best or what should be left out? Because every classroom is different it is quite impossible to come even close to predicting what will work. Those who try to be descriptive point out how few years half-inch video systems have been around and that there are no real "video

experts." (Agreement with question 2.)

Adoption vs. Mutation

This bout is related to the preceding one. We have watched people get very exercised in what amounts to a political question - in getting video into the schools (Doing Good), how far can you go in meeting existing instructional goals and in accommodating administrative expectations before you debase the medium of what makes it worth teaching in the first place (Doing Bad)?

Judge yourself whether the activities that follow compromise the real strengths of video. (Also whether agreement/disagreement with question 3 represents a mutation of video or a practical adoption of it to schools.)

Inductive Bias vs. Deductive Bias

Here is a question of teaching style. Throughout the activities (and, of course, in other sections of this journal as well) you will find a pedagogical polarity. It is the old tension between structure and non-structure, between student-centered and teacher-centered priorities, between lectures and projects, between grades and no grades, between individual and group curricula, between short and long term "units."

We urge you to pay special attention in searching out assumptions among these conflicting positions as you study the Things To Do that follow. (Agreement with question 4 suggests a preference for the "inductive" process, disagreement for the "deductive" process.)

How to Teach vs. What to Teach

Some people think you can separate these two. Some don't. (If you disagreed in question 5, you are in the second group.)

Process vs. Product

How important is it that kids make good tapes?

For some, achieving a good product is the only legitimate and workable goal when kids make video. This position in yet another classic argument contends that the only way to learn how to communicate with video is by rigorously seeking to fashion an effective, artful message. "Product" becomes the central index and the primary feedback mechanism in the process of learning video. (Disagreement with question 6.)

Sharp disagreement on the other side. The compulsive, competitive focus on the end product corrupts the means to that end. Or: the only justification for bringing video into a classroom is that it will help kids learn. That is, we are teaching kids not teaching video. Some "process" people believe that the very nature of the medium itself is a cybernetic one - a process of information feedback where there can be, by definition, no final end point or product. (Agreement with question 6.)

Making vs. Studying

There is much of this schism too. Some people choose only to teach production. (Agreement with question 7.) Others develop courses that are "study" oriented - they have readings and screenings and field-trips and discussions but never involve making video. (Disagreement with question 7.) Some people we know teach both production and criticism yet feel that, in practice, these two approaches don't work well with each other. Still others feel that making video and studying it can only work together.

We're going to fess up to our Editors' Anxiety.

We are unhappy with a choice we made at some point in the development of this issue of Radical Software. Maybe it was a tone we set. We can't re-

member. In any event, we feel it is unfortunate that the activities we solicited, collected and ourselves described deal exclusively with production-oriented activities. There are many nifty things to do that make kids smarter about video and television yet don't require a single piece of hardware.

In keeping with our general wish to present as many options as possible, we feel bad about the omission - justifications of only 64 pages notwithstanding. To counter our anxiety we have put special emphasis in the RESOURCES section on materials that provide non-production activities you ought to consider trying with your kids.

BEWARE these dualities.

Studying opposites is a good heuristic device. Yet, although it is helpful to consider clear-cut choices, we suggest that you reject adopting them. We do.

Introductory Video Exercises

QUINCY BENT

The following activity is designed to provide a series of structured experiences for exploring some of the fundamental techniques of video and TV production. Used as an introduction to some basic visual concepts, these exercises may provide children with a helpful framework for planning and producing their own video material.

The Activity

The exercises break down into seven main components: the first five are designed for the single camera VTR system, and the last two for a multi-camera, studio system.

For all exercises it is essential that a monitor or TV set be placed so that all participants can see themselves as they perform the various activities. If you are using a portapak system, hook up an RF converter to send the picture directly to the monitor or TV set.

The exercises should be done in sequence. Each child does not have to do every exercise. Generally it is easier to rotate turns so that each child becomes a "subject," then a camera operator, then a switcher (when working in a studio system.) If you



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have a large number of children - 20 to 40 - it is suggested that you use more than one subject for each exercise. Make sure that each child gets a turn with the equipment - especially the camera.

While exercises may seem complex when they are described in written form, you will find that they take a very short time to complete - even with a large class. A group of fifteen to twenty children can usually complete all the exercises in about thirty minutes.

Good luck!

EXERCISE ONE: Far and Near

This first series of exercises deals with the most basic properties of every visual medium. What happens to our visual concept of size and number when they are defined by a small, flat, one dimensional surface? This problem is incredibly difficult to verbalize, but with immediate feedback from a video monitor, it is easy to experiment with.

A. Static Camera/Active Subject

Set the camera at a wide angle focal length and place it on a table or tripod. It is important that