

Three Propositions, Two Frameworks and an Indictment

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PROPOSITION ONE: Redefining Survival Skills

Understanding Media is a Basic Skill. The traditional three R's simply no longer constitute the core curriculum of things that kids need to know about if they are to make it in our society. There are entirely new sets of perceptual, critical and creative skills. No medium is more important for kids to understand than video.

PROPOSITION TWO: The Importance of Interface

Using video with kids means more than extending programs in the Communications Arts. Similarly, the interrelationship of video to existing instructional rubrics (and to the traditional basic skills) needs to be explored from a broader perspective than the familiar Audio-Visual frameworks have allowed. Video should be used to fuse separate disciplines and to reintegrate school and community.

PROPOSITION THREE: How You Teach Is What You Teach or Watch Out for Hidden Structures

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. We must use video to extend the options for learning.

FRAMEWORK I

Video as Something to Know About and as a Way of Knowing

This framework seeks to help a teacher in figuring out what kids should know about television and video. By outlining four broad teaching units, the framework points out concrete concerns from which learning experiences can be designed. Examples of specific activities are not included here.

1) Knowing Oneself: Defining a Video Self

A first priority in teaching video should be grounding each learner within his or her own realm of experience. Kids ought to be provided with activities that help them gauge their own facilities in video-related skills and that help them perceive the role television plays in their lives.

Gauging Facilities

Learning about any medium is, in a sense, contingent upon learning how one learns. The teacher, then, should design learning experiences that cover all facets of video communications. The goal here is for kids to try on many different video-making and video-studying roles - being a "critic," a "writer," a "cameraperson," a "director." But the teacher should also invent rituals through which kids can reflect upon the meanings of these experiences. Kids need to track their relative facility and interest in doing different tasks. From this they can fashion a realistic portrait of themselves as video people. It should be a tentative portrait however - continuing work will let kids test further their sense of proficiency; amplifying skills that are already good, strengthening those which are weak.

Here is a checklist of specific skill groupings that might be included: working with hardware, scripting-conceptualizing, interviewing, analyzing video productions, directing productions, measuring impact upon audience, acting, researching, editing videotape. And you could list more.

There are other important dimensions of working with video in which kids need to gauge their facility: working styles (tenacity, independence, resourcefulness), group-relations abilities (working alone, or with others, following and leading), observational skills (listening, being aware of the needs



of others, processing elements of group dynamics). And more.

Perceiving Dependencies and Options

Television is such a pervasive constituent in the life of today's youngsters that they have no awareness of its scope. The technological media of communications and environment mold us in ways that we do not see. Video Studies must try to carry the idea that "the medium is the message" past the threshold of perception. By helping our students look at themselves and their work in new ways, we can work the epiphany that accompanies seeing new patterns to something more important – consciously molding patterns for oneself.

So an early necessity in teaching video is helping kids discover what role TV watching plays in their lives. Also, what is the full spectrum of television's opportunities for information, entertainment and interaction. Hardware isn't necessary in devising activities that address this need.

2) Learning the Turf: TV Study

With an understanding of themselves as video consumers, students are ready to participate in a more formal study of the television medium. Two perspectives can help the teacher discover ideas that will lead the kids in understanding television.

Surveying Local Broadcast Institutions

This is a "micro" perspective that includes study of local video mediums. Kids should examine who controls these institutions, the jobs existing within each, what service they provide the community, what programming they carry and should carry, the audience being reached and what effect the programming has both in terms of "content" and "massage."

Defining TV as Mass Communication

This is a "macro" perspective. The emphasis is on discovering larger patterns and issues which tie the medium into society as a whole. Concerns here might include these topics: what is the history of the medium; what is the nature of national network broadcasting; who regulates the medium; can new technological developments expand and alter TV; how has the medium effected our culture; what ought its future be?

3) Choosing Weapons: VT Making

The content of a new medium is the form of an old medium. For the most part, television today carries the forms that were developed for earlier drama, radio, motion picture and newspaper mediums. In using portable and simple-to-operate video systems, most of us (like broadcasters) tend to use the medium from the perspective of these older, known mediums. To a certain extent, this is fine: kids ought to be provided with experiences that promote their critical and creative competencies

with regard to current television forms. At the same time, we need to be particularly sensitive to the unrevealed potentials of this new medium. It is clear that portable video systems can do things that no other medium can do. We need to create opportunities and tolerances for our students to explore and chart the full domain of videotape.

Production Modes

Here is a checklist of production modes that kids should be introduced to: Dramatic (theater games, improvisations, original teleplays, adaptations of stage productions); Documentary (studies of other cultures and sub-cultures, portraits of friends and institutions, investigative reporting on school or community issues); Bio-Documentary (self-portraits, studies of own family and peer groups, reflections on facets of one's own culture and environment); Group Processing (role-playing, values clarification games, ethnography of the video class, tape exchanges with kids in other programs at other locations); Journalistic (street-shooting, in-depth interviews with playback to subject, school newscasting); Experimental and Non-Figurative (video-feedback, collage and resynthesis of broadcast materials, non-narrative studies of motion, time, place); Mixed Media (tapes designed for use within other performing contexts – music, dance theater, recitation, the plastic arts.)

4) Making Changes: Purposeful Video

The focus now turns outward. Emphasis falls on locating a problem and then trying to effect it in some known way. The process here centers on the concept of a "student-task force" and it incorporates four active phases: research, production, presentation and evaluation.

This final portion of the framework ties together the preceding ones. Much exploration of various "study" and "making" facets of Video Studies has equipped students to use their new critical and creative skills for a purpose. Working as a group, they put their artistries and understandings to task. They use video to communicate a message of their choice to a specific audience outside the class. The criteria for success become objectified and concise - of effecting real change.

FRAMEWORK II

Video as a Communication Tool Serving Education

It is not enough that video and television enter the curriculum as a new and legitimate subject. Video should be used for the purpose of breaking down - not reinforcing - the anachronistic structure of our schools.

Here then is another very short framework. It prescribes another set of concerns that ring those of the preceding framework.



1) Interdisciplinary Tool

In the degree that video joins reading, speaking, listening and writing as an integral part of the Communication Arts, it can become a constant presence in any teaching situation. Because video is a tool for gathering, processing, and presenting information, it can be placed within any of the traditional curricula. But more, it can fuse what are implicitly presented to kids as distinct and unrelated fields of knowledge. Projects can be designed that use video to wed, say, athletic programs and the English class or political campaigns to social studies or science field trips to journalism classes.

2) Intra School Information Systems

Parents, teachers, students and administrators need to stay in touch with each other. Either used alone or programmed into existing closed-circuit systems, video can serve the needs of a school's community to keep itself informed. We tend to forget sometimes video's capabilities to store and re-cycle information.

3) A Mirror for Self-Realization

Video is a therapeutic tool. It has important uses in helping individuals or groups gain more objective access to their own behavior and feelings. Video tools have important applications in areas of student counselling and in on-going teacher development. The ability of videotape to capture learning interaction is such that it will be necessary for many teachers to develop completely new skills in effectively utilizing this dimension of video.

4) Access to Community Resources

With video the real (reel) world can enter the classroom. Making tapes necessarily turns kids to resources and issues beyond the school's walls. Consider cable television. Our inherited notions about schools and education will be broken to pieces when cable head-ends become located in institutions of learning. Not only will kids have real audiences, but they will also have real services to pro-

vide various community groups as they enter the school to do their own programming.

Video is far more than a new configuration of basic skills, a new subject to be squeezed into the school's curriculum. It is a communications medium, a cybernetic information system with potentials for re-shaping both the structure of teaching and the structure of schooling. People who use video with kids ought to consider the medium's potential to interface all segments of the learning environment - subjects, institutions, and people.

AN INDICTMENT AND A MODEL

Frameworks and diagrams are a little cold. I want to balance them with something more personal. The concern here remains that of structure. But by laying down some indictments and then by describing how I think video should be taught, I hope to express more personally how I feel about all this.

Some Personal Observations About the Way Things Get Taught

Almost all of what passes for learning in our schools and universities has four basic components: the subject area, the space/schedule, the student, and the teacher. Interacting, these elements prescribe the ground of what is to be learned and they define the processes by which learning will take place.

My own experiences as teacher and student convince me that, by and large, those who teach have thought very little about the nature of learning or the implicit statements about knowledge-getting that reside within the curricula that are offered for study. The emphasis always appears to be placed on the "subject" and course content. At the same time, my own work in media constantly supports that proposition that how we learn is, in fact, what we learn.

Subject Area

Every teacher is forced to teach in a specific area. It would be impossible not to do this. Yet too often in making the necessary decisions about the subject we will teach, we carelessly adopt paradigms that were developed for other fields of knowledge and developed at a time when both the nature of knowledge and the needs of learners was different than they are today. Continuing specialization is part of the problem. The more we know of a thing, the less we teach of its whole. Interdisciplinary approaches are rare. Thus we leave it to the bright student to perceive not only the way that our own field fits together but the manner that all fields interweave their concerns in all ways and always. I observe that in teaching media we almost invariably disconnect making things from studying things. There are some reasons for this but none of them are congruent with the nature of the field.

Schedules and Spaces

We all know that any subject area is affected by how it is packaged as well as how it is defined. But it is uncommon to find teachers or departments that challenge their own institutions' packaging of established and arbitrary schedules, length of classes, durations of courses, places for learning or the very notions bound up in departmental structures. Each of these things affects what it is we have chosen to teach about.

Students

The one-dimensional perspective by which students are viewed is similarly out-of-sync with what our own discipline makes clear. In planning courses and departmental curricula we take little account beyond lip service of the fact that there is no such thing as a typical student -- that each learner comes to us with different concerns, different experiences and, most important, different ways of learning. As people have noted before, our educational systems are based upon the model of the factory; each of us holds our position on the production line as we perform the same operation upon an endless stream of similarly perceived objects. We even insist on our own forms of quality control -- grades, requirements and degrees.

Teachers

The observations one can make about the fourth component of formal schooling are no less chilling. We have chosen to define our roles as teachers in nineteenth century terms even though we claim to know something about twentieth century communications forms and our post-industrial society. Like our own grade school teachers, our students will be able to say of us, "He didn't teach video for fifteen years, he taught the same year of video fifteen times." Fortunately, elementary school teaching is beginning to change today and there is much we can learn from the movement towards "open education." We can learn as teachers, for example, to evaluate and distinguish between activity-based and lecture-based learning, between inductive and deductive learning processes, between student se-



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lected and teacher-selected curricula. If we perceive ourselves as mediums through which discovery is to take place, we ought to be able to adopt a variety of roles equal to the variety of learners and the variety of subject areas we teach. And if we were really to apply the media truism about form-is-content to our selection of colleagues, we would find our institutions maintaining the eclecticism and dynamism that is inherent in our field. The frightening movement towards certification of instructors would be exposed for the featherbedding apparatus it really is.

It is difficult to observe the medium of existing, institutionalized education without indicting it. Yet, faced with the pervasive and persuasive presence of established norms for teaching and learning, it is even more difficult to begin turning things around. But it is precisely this task that I feel the teachers of media are specially equipped to do.

An Integrated Video Studies Curriculum

As a way of discussing a re-integration of the whats and the hows of teaching, I would like to describe a model video curriculum. Putting it another way, here is how I would structure an integrated set of learning environments for video. The broad aim behind this plan is simply to open-up many ways of learning and many ways of defining subject matter.

Formal Video Studies

There should be at least one course in video. It would address the concerns and follow the developmental structure outlined in Framework I. But there would also be an introductory course aimed at "exposing" students to the fundamentals of image making and image study as coexisting within film, photography, sound and video.

In designing a specific curriculum for a formal course, care would be spent in constructing activities that cover as broad as possible a spectrum of experiential processes. Sometimes students would be forced to work together, sometimes alone. Sometimes the teacher's input would be quite central (lectures, analysis of videotapes, discussions of

readings, etc.) In other activities, students might be required to teach each other. Sometimes they would be required to take on problems without any guidance. In all formal courses, students would be urged to reflect upon the variety of ways in which they were being asked to learn.

Such formal offerings would provide students with a highly structured and tightly focused field to learn about. The pace and content would be pretty much controlled by the teacher. Informal courses, required readings, viewings, discussions, field-trips, production projects and presentations by guests would seek to insure that kids perceive the field of video and television in its broadest sense.

Interdisciplinary Video Studies

A video teacher would carry less than the full academic load in order to work with others on the faculty in developing cross-disciplinary projects. Teaching units that involve broadcasting analysis and VTR production could be scheduled for "American History" and "Urban Studies" classes. Elsewhere in the school's curriculum, video would be incorporated within theater, dance and writing courses.

In order to insure that the interdisciplinary work have an impact upon both school and community, a special interdisciplinary course would be offered. Here small groups of kids with production competence in video would use their skills in seeking to effect specific change within the school or larger community. Although video would be extensively used within this course. The real subject matter would be determined by the students. The only requirements placed on each of the small video task forces would be that it research its problem, develop a strategy for change, produce a video-based statement, present this message to a targeted audience and evaluate the message-success in terms of goal. It would be through this "process" rather than a prescribed "content" that this course would define itself. An interdisciplinary focus would be achieved, of course, regardless of what specific "problem" students choose.

Informal and Independent Video Studies

Finally, an integrated video curriculum should lay great stress on creating opportunities (and tolerances) for "other" contexts through which to teach and learn about television.

The teacher would try to establish work-study or apprentice-type situations where individual kids would work on video related projects. Perhaps, for example, kids would spend time at a local broadcast or cable station. Or they might use skills they had developed (and the school's equipment if necessary) in providing video expertise to groups outside the school. Or some kids could teach video within nearby elementary schools.

Open workshops and free access to hardware would

be available for any student who wanted to try something with videotape. The teacher's goal in such an open context would be to accommodate each individual's rate, level, purpose and style of learning - even when the teacher could foresee failure on various terms. Indeed, failures would be common. A specific concern in creating informal workshop environments would be to help students gain the confidence to experiment freely and for its own sake instead of constantly seeking a "successful" product and a teacher's sanction.

A Summary

Education is an art. It takes its form from the delicate and shifting engagement between those who are learning, those who are teaching, the environment of that learning and the subject matter through which and for which the meeting takes place. Because teaching is an art, because video is an art too, there is very, very little that can be said in a general way about any specific component of the exchange. Similarly, there is very little that can be assumed or left unstudied.

It is not the purpose of either the two frameworks or this model to provide formulas for working with video and kids. I believe there are no prescriptions to be handed down about what constitutes a good teacher, or learner, or source, or curriculum. Rather, the purpose of this article is to open-up options, to encourage diversity, to help in considering all possibilities and dangers. And to show how these are interrelated completely.



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