What's Doing

Some Video Programs Here and There

Alright, we're going to say it again. We know you've heard it before but we'll say it just once. We promise. "EDUCATION TODAY IS IN BAD SHAPE," Okay, so what else is new? And that's the point. A lot.

Most of us don't have to be told that, in general, schools have failed in their attempt at providing kids with knowledge of the basic survival skills they'll need in the 21st century. Yet, there is somehow a built in implication in the writings of today's critics that schools, in the past, didn't "Fail." There is a notion that somehow, in the mid-sixties we suddenly found ourselves in the midst of an educational crisis of unmanageable proportions. What's important, however, is to look back, just a bit, to see where we've come from, to understand that our ideas of what schools should be are recent history.

Much of this ideology can be directly traced to the influence of men like John Dewey along with the educational explosion that followed the second world war. The GI Bill gave many men a college education who otherwise never would have had a chance. The quonset hut campuses that dotted the landscape in the late forties provided second generation immigrants and the American working class with career opportunities previously inaccessible.

The Baby Boom

Meanwhile, back on the home front men and women were increasing the elementary school population. The baby boom was on. The concentric rings of suburban growth spread around the urban cores like rings around a stone dropped into water. The rapid-fire growth of the economy provided a tax base which enabled communities to pour tremendous resources into the schooling of their young. New schools call for new plans. The educational theorists had a field day. With an education population growing, educators were forced to become more conscious of community concerns and desires.

By the early 50s, the Doctor Spock generation was entering those bright shiny classrooms in the morning and rushing home in the afternoon to sit in front of the new American landscape - television.

Discovery of "The Ghetto"

Back in the inner cities those same Victorian structures that had housed three generations of immigrant children now faced a new wave of kids with which they were not familiar. The magnet of the suburb had drawn off much of the cities' experienced teaching and administrative staff leaving to those new college graduates, schools which were not prepared to deal with a growing third world population.

Yet changes did not take place despite the articulate writings of the "new" educators. Most inner city schools were powerless to affect change. The automobile left behind a blight which would increasingly decay urban centers across America. The blight was left to run rampant. Northeast liberals could decry segregation in the South and

react angrily to the images of national guardsmen escorting black children to their schools while red neck whites shouted obscenities. Their own schools were as bad. What the written law didn't say, the unwritten laws of economics and culture did.

By the sixties the blight had turned to rage and the fires of Watts, Detroit and Newark made Selma, Birmingham and Little Rock seem mild. Schools became centers of conflict. The predominantly white school boards were confronted by angry groups of blacks whose frustration had reached the point of explosion. The suburbs, too, were facing new challenges. A growing dissatisfaction among the country's young manifested itself in ever increasing hair lengths, higher decibel levels in music and the language of the drug culture. Dropouts were no longer inner city poor but the sons and daughters of those who thought they had left the airless streets and decaying buildings behind.

Schools again were faced with either challenging or adapting to these social changes. The length of someone's hair might become a court case. The presence of men in a women's dormitory could cause a campus strike. The language of the culture had changed - the "juvenile delinquents" of the 50s became the "culturally deprived" of the 60s. In the 50s you might have been a "drop out," but by the 60s you were just "following the beat of a different drum."

Things were changing. Schools were frightened. Educators were in a quandary.

New Voices

From 3,000 miles away a few voices were being heard. It was A.S. Neill who sent the idea of Summerhill crashing on the shores of North America. The advocates of the British open school grew in number. John Holt told us why children failed, and Jonathan Kozol told us how inner city schools were destroying the minds they were supposed to help create. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner took the 60s rhetoric and made teaching more than honorable - they made it subversive!

And Piaget helped us find out how kids learn and Bettelheim showed us that there were various ways to help kids learn. Ivan Illich got us thinking about just how radical we really were in our educational theory. Charles Reich tried to explain why this was all happening to us now. And Alvin Toffler got us to think about education in the future tense.

And sure enough schools changed. The schools that looked pretty much the same in 1900, 1920 and 1945, were different places. Yet there was a problem. Teachers were asked to teach with tools and methods that they were unfamiliar with. The young teacher walking into a room with 30 desks had limited metaphors and often became the image of those teachers they once beheld, an image they didn't like. It became necessary to learn about new tools and luckily there were a few around to make

us smart.

New Technologies

It didn't take educators very long to see the potential of new technology as applied to education. Television became a focal point for that concern. By the early 60s educational television was a reality. Organized with the best intentions, much of the programming failed as it was based on the premise that "if it's on a TV screen, kids will watch it." Educators either failed to recognize or ignored the impact of film and TV on children. And it's not that we weren't warned. George Gordon tried to come to grips with education through television, John Culkin taught us that films and television were equally important to watch and that it was important for kids to be involved in the process of making their own films and television. And, of course, Marshall McLuhan taught us that media was more than just print, radio, television and film.

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So now, you can walk into a school and you're not shocked by the sight of a TV monitor or the presence of a movie flickering on the screen. It is not unusual for kids to be making movies or producing a TV show. Elementary schools broke down walls. Graffiti-stained, ink-welled desks made their way into antique stores. High schools let down their own hair and allowed students to decide on what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it. From the Parkway Project in Philadelphia to the Berkeley Public schools, from the New School in

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North Dakota to the newly integrated schools of North Little Rock, schools were beginning to look and sound different.

But can we cope with the change? Teachers, un-equipped to deal with the tasks before them, floun-der. School systems, not knowing what should be taught (or why), return to "basics." And parents, not understanding the changes taking place around them, demand more structure and stability in their community schools.

And so, in education in general, we've reached a point of sitting back just a bit and reflecting and questioning. Where is it heading? Does the educa-tion work? What is significant in the new technolo-gy? And on and on it goes.

We all continually question our work with kids. As much as we dislike words like "accountability" or "behavioral objectives" we all still select our own goals and standards. Before we sat down to do this issue a number of people involved in the use of vid-eo in education shared problems with each other Each of us was most interested in hearing the "de-scriptions" of what was happening.

Is education in Bad Shape? Maybe. But things are better.

And so, here are descriptions of just a few of the many hundreds of programs going on around the country that are using video to make kids smart about themselves and the world around them. We don't pretend that they are representative (or even successful) - they're merely an eclectic group of statements from people who wanted to share some-thing with you.

The Evolution of a Non-Program

CHUCK ANDERSON

Video has never been a budget item at Longwood High School, yet two students were selected to at-tend the 1970 White House Conference on Youth as media consultants. The school, located in eas-tern Long Island, New York has never had an ar-tist–in–residence, yet during the last five years stu-dents and teachers have used video as an agent for social consciousness raising, and as a vehicle to do-cument the education of the hearing handicapped. The school has never purchased any equipment, yet at present, video programming, news and weather spots, and public service announcements are broadcast in the student commons via a home-made closed circuit video/audio system. On any gi-ven afternoon, Longwood students may be found looking through trash piles for speakers and dis-carded television receivers; they may be participa-ting in a student intern program at a local cable te-levision station; or they may be moving through a shopping center, conducting video interviews about local politics.

Early Work

In 1968, Longwood High School was given an Am-pex video system (1 inch), acquired earlier for a Ti-tle I program in the elementary schools but never used. The English Department requisitioned the system to produce a bi-weekly electronic "newspa-per" for viewing in study halls. Programs inclu-ded interviews, student politics, film clips, fashion shows, news, etc.

Later that year, a dispute arose among the students over some racial slurs in an underground newspa-per. Borrowing a ½ inch, portable VTR unit from George Stoney, (of the Alternate Media Center), the Longwood videomakers were given permission by the administration to follow the course of the disturbance. It was hoped that if students were giv-en the opportunity to sound off in front of the te-levision camera, a process could be improvised that might create better understanding of the issues and thereby prevent the kind of violence that had closed the schools down for a half day the year be-fore. The video crew covered the events from the initial confrontation in the student commons be-tween angry blacks and the administration to a se-ries of meetings between student representatives and school leaders held during the rest of the day. (This process is documented in detail in Chuck Anderson's forthcoming book, VIDEO POWER, to be published by Praeger in the fall of 1974.) An edited videotape was shown to the entire Long-wood student body the next day, followed by a se-ries of discussions on the issues. There was no vio-lence. The school stayed open.

During the next couple of years, Longwood stu-dents continued to develop their skills as video-makers, using the old Ampex system in the school, and borrowed equipment for out-of-school street shooting. In 1971, the school acquired a SONY Rover series portapak system, again through a lit-tle-used Title I elementary school program. At this time, the English Department began to seriously think about including TV communications in the curriculum.