Children and Television: Lessons from Sesame Street

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"For example, in the 'hollers' of Appalachia, where the median income is well below five thousand dollars, over 95% of the families have sets. Few of these children have ever visited a zoo or a library or a fire station, but they do watch television up to eight hours a day." (page 18)

"Television's impersonality is one of its obvious weaknesses. It stares unblinking at everyone alike, making no accomadations to differences among members of its audience. Yet its impersonality, and especially its nompunitiveness, is also one of its special strengths. We look ahead to the advantages of two-way television communication which will allow the viewer to engage in some sort of dialogue with what he sees on the set.... but there still may be a great deal to be said for just looking at people on the television set and knowing that they cannot look back at you, cannot criticize you or make you face up to your responsibility.... Periodic liberation from duty to the expectations of others may be just what attracts children to television and frees them to learn from it." (p. 21-22)

"Television contains noe of these emotional overtones. A child may watch and learn by correcting his mistakes without fear of the public exposure that occurs in the classroom.... Television's impersonality removes the constant threat of humiliation." (P. 22)

"... the conditions that promote effiecient learning....two-way exchange between student and teacher, sequencing of the material to be learned into small steps of increasing difficulty, evoking active participation from the learner, and providing clear reinforcement of the right responses and quick correction of the wrong ones." (P. 30)

"There were objections in the seminars that these basic skills teach the children what to think instead of how to think. Some psychologists distinguish the thought 'product' and the thought 'process,' concluding that the quality of the process is crucial to a child's development while the correctness is inconsequential.... At our seminars we decided to try both the what to think and the how to think. We did not see any incompatibility between the two, so we took as another premise that information probably is worth having if only to provide thought processes with material to manipulate." (P. 48-49)

"In many learning situations, preschool children have difficulty discriminating what is essential or relevant from what is incidental or irrelevant to the specified goal, and this certainly is true when they respond to film or television. Young children are readily distracted from the central content of a program and often respond to peripheral details..., special care must be given to make salient what the child is expected to learn." (P. 86-87)

"If an entertaining way can not be invented to teach the central content, and a nonessential but amusing feature can be added to hold the child's attention, the risk of adding this peripheral element may be worth taking." (P. 87)

"What we now need to discover is how to make entertainment instrumental to learning so that learning contains the excitement and joy that a child has experienced while not being 'educated.'" (P. 91)

"Only a small part of what children learn is taught to them directly. The importance of informal learning in undirected play is beyond dispute." (P. 93)

"Sesame Street uses direct methods to teach basic intellectual skills, but adopts indirect teaching methods to display certain social attitudes, such as people treating each other with kindness and courtesy..." (P. 93)

"Children are accustomed to watching television that is expensively produced, with high quality in visual appearance and form if not in content." (P. 102)

"But for children, music and sound effects serve a remarkably wide range of functions, demonstrating the children's abilities to find meaning in many different musical forms and styles." (P. 103)

"A Static visual presentation apparently stymies physical participation and violates the children's expectation that televised visual action will accompany what they hear." (P. 106

"Children will direct their attention to what surprises them, to an image or event that violates their established expectations about the order of their world. They focus upon these deviations because these pose a puzzle that must be unraveled in order to reestablish a sense of order and regularity. Did the child actually see the surprising event correctly? If so, how could it have happened? Few people can let such violations of expectation rest without working hard to resolve them, and this motivation is a powerful one for children, apparently operating as early as the first year of life.... Slow-motion and fast-action show people and objects moving at unaccustomed speeds; one of the most appealing devices for children is the pixilation technique that produces a kind of speeded-up comic movement like the Keystone Cop chases..." (P. 109-110)

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from Pauline Kael "In animation, anything can turn magically into anything else, and children love it for the illogic that is a visual equivalent of their nursery rhymes and jingles and word games." (P. 112)

"Children direct their attention to visual action on television ignoring whatever is not functionally related to that action. By animating abstract symbols (and even concepts, if put in concrete visual form), these elements can participate as actors instead of being superimposed on the dramatic action as stationary bystanders." (P 113)

"Animation is only one way of directing attention by making the material to be learned a part of visual action. All forms of television production for children must find functional ways to bind educational content and visual events. If the content remains superimposed or peripheral to the visual action that children expect from television, it surely will be ignored." (P. 113)

"However book reading on television simply does not work because of its static visual quality and its total reliance on still pictures and spoken words." (P. 115)

"A final consideration in sustaining children's attention is the use of a diversity of program elements. Children lose interest when the program dwells too long on one subject or remains too long at one pace or in one style. This feeling of sameness appears in several huises and always loses the children's attention." (P. 124)

"According to our research, beyond responding to puppets and animated figures, children generally prefer watching and listening to other children rather than to adults.... several films that originally evoked only mild interest worked much better when children's voices were added to the sound track." (P. 127-28)

"Both fast-paced and slow-paced material will hold children's attention (the common criticism that Sesame Street is continuously frenetic is simply inaccurate), but a slow , peaceful episode is more appealing when surrounded by fast-moving episodes than when it follows another slow, quiet piece. Interest in any particular episode is higher if it creates a pace and mood that looks, sounds and feels different from the one that preceded it.... When the segments within a program are varied in character, content, style, pace and mood, young children's attention holds up well over a one-hour period." (P. 130-31)

"Our curriculum also was criticized for being compartmenalized. Since it lists a series of discrete skills, critics contended that children will not know how to combine them to meet real problems." (P. 178)

"Although we place the greatest importance upon knowing children's reactions, we cannot ask each child in advance what kind of program he would like to see created, and then-- if the child can specify-- proceed to create it for him. Nor can we ask children to create their own national programming. Adults must assume the responsibility to approximate as closely as possible the programs that will meet children's needs and interests." (P. 181)

"Although we did not camouflage Sesame STreet's educational content, we did try to make it as inviting and amusing as we could. In doing so, we rejected the ideas that learning is not learning unless it hurts, that children never do what is good for them unless they are forced to , and that entertainment (acceptable as a temporary relaxation earned by diligent work but not really good for you) competes with education (which is good for you, but is earnest and hard). (P. 236)

Quoting James Gibbons six "successful ventures in the use of technology in education" :

1. The educational program must be planned for a specific target audience
2. Specific educational objectives that are relevant to the needs and interests of the target audence must be clearly understood and agreed on
3. A systematic multi-media approach must be used in which both knowledge specialists and media specialists are employed.
4. Educators who are capable of learning and understanding the instructional characteristics of various media must be found.
5. Clear and careful provision for personal interaction...must be made.
6. Evaluation and feedback arrangements must be made to monitor audience reaction and change the instructional material to suit audience needs. (P. 239)

"We do not yet know if children can use television to learn how to learn, but there is evidence that it can help children move from 'knowing that' to 'knowing how,' ... For example in a series of reports, Jerome Kagan and his colleagues at Harvard have shown that watching models can 'modify and impulsive tempo' - that is, models can teach children to stop to think instead of acting upon the first idea that occurs to them. Gavriel Salomon...has shown that zoom-in carmera techniques can help children to pick out the important details in a problem-solving situation, discriminating thrm from those details to be ignored as irrelevant to the problem being solved.... Doudgas and Nacy Denney... have found that ' information-processing strategies' can be taught to young children by televised models." (P. 246-7)