



*Teaching TV*—a national survey of video produced by secondary and primary school students working with media educators, artists and producers—aims to represent recent developments in media education. The five hour compilation focuses on how a variety of media projects and programs confront students' experience of mass media in the United States. How do, for example, student videotapes and the programs they were produced within engage with mass media forms and products? Does their work emphasize critique or imitation? What are the larger goals of these programs and the work they produce? Do these video productions encourage the development of 'media literacy' and 'critical viewing' skills for both the student producers and their audiences? *Teaching TV* asks what is the relationship between media production, media theory and pedagogy.

Encouraged—in part—by developments in video technology and the growing media studies movement in colleges and universities, media education at the secondary and primary school levels has undergone significant growth in the last ten years. *Teaching TV* attempts to represent the developing media education movement, indeed to assess the claim that it is a movement, and to critically analyze a wide variety of projects and programs from around the country.

### PROGRAM 1 *Representing School*

Unless you are a student, or you teach, or are somehow involved in the administration of a school, it is difficult to re-imagine the experience of the classroom. Program 1 serves as an introduction, by locating these productions in their institutional contexts and by representing school through the work of student producers.

The first tape in the program, *Video Alphabet*, poses a central dilemma: as educators, how do we structure learning so as to teach essential skills, while at the same time involving the students as full partners in the process? Produced as an exercise to teach kindergarteners their ABC's, *Video Alphabet*, like many of the works included in *Teaching TV*, provokes a consideration of what Michelle Mattleart calls the "active/passive" problem.

Referring specifically to the positioning of students as passive viewers in relation to that influential experiment in educational TV, *Sesame Street*, Mattleart argues that how a student is encouraged to participate "conditions not only the quality, but the very nature of the learning process".<sup>1</sup> While Mattleart specifically addresses the activity of viewing, *Teaching TV* also introduces a consideration of the activity of production.

Like viewing, production can be both "active" and "passive." Video production alone, despite the claims of many media educators, is not inherently "active" in that it does not encourage students to develop a critique of how television functions within culture. It would seem fruitful—and very necessary—to analyze all the work included in the show for their various abilities to encourage the activity of "reading" dominant culture—from television to textbooks—through the very process of producing. For example, *Talkin' About Droppin' Out* from Madison High School borrows liberally from the forms of mass culture—Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, popsongs from rap to muzak, *Benny Hill*. These fragments are interwoven with student voices to build a dense montage representing the complexities of dropping out—and staying in—school.

Two striking examples of video activating and altering a traditional educational text are *Bloody Mary: Mayhem in the Mirror* and *Textbook Mystery: Oral History*. In these tapes, students produce their own course materials through a critical interrogation of their lesson and textbook, respectively. For *Bloody Mary* the history lesson becomes the somewhat incidental moment from which a fairytale emerges. *Textbook Mystery* uses the textbook as the basis for an investigation of the numerous violations of the constitutional rights of working people and people of color related to students by older Americans. For example, two elderly people explain to student producers that they'd spent numerous years in prison for simply speaking on street corners about socialism and communism.

### PROGRAM 2 *The Forms of Experience: Speaking through Mass Cultural Forms*

"Cultural" in this context is not referring to the aesthetic plane of existence, but to an idea of culture as a way of

living within an industrial society. All the meanings of social experience can be encompassed by this concept.<sup>2</sup> Television can be understood as informing and being informed by our social experience, as integrally bound up with the culture of the United States. Furthermore, in a real way television and media generally are the means by which we make sense of both ourselves and the world in which we live. It is significant in this regard that much of the work submitted for *Teaching TV* uses mass cultural forms. Significant, but not surprising, that students presented with the opportunity of television production, produce what they know. What they know best are narratives; sci-fi fantasy and horror/suspense dominated the submissions (perhaps indicating the gender imbalance in production-based media education). Music video, followed by news programs, and public service announcements are also common forms. It is important to note, in almost every case, the effort at imitation is undercut by a combination of factors: limitations in the technology available to the student, the extent to which the student understands the codes and conventions of the form, and finally, a sort of resistance resulting from the clash of the student's experience—manifest in choices of content—with the imperatives of the form.

Production becomes a means of re-negotiating the experience of these forms for the student producers. It provides a chance to construct their own meanings and their own culture. This is especially evident in the handling of the music video, where production meets a potent aspect of youth culture, music. *The Second Week of Deer Camp*, *No Fresh Words*, *Lady "C"* and *Bordersong* all negotiate different paths through the terrain of experience, fashion, and the music video form. Opposition through culture is perhaps most clearly articulated through *Rock Talk*, an interview with a "black metal head." The young African-American woman speaks about her enthusiasm for heavy metal music, a taste usually associated with white male youth culture. Far from being a simple consumer, she consciously uses the music to articulate critical positions on issues such as censorship and racism. Similarly, three pieces from VIDKIDCO, a youth production program at the Long Beach Museum of Art, articulate aspects of Chicano youth culture that are often misrepresented in broadcast television, namely graffiti and the twin problems of drugs and violence. Their direct and unapologetic analysis of these subjects demands our attention and suggests that we ought to re-think our solutions to these social problems.

### PROGRAM 3 *The World Television Makes:* *Critical Work on Media*

The first media programs, commonly called mass communication, were established in the late sixties. They found their justification in, and frequently modeled their very curriculum on, vocational education. Even today video is part of something called the "graphic communications module" of the New York State industrial arts/technology syllabus. In the space of one semester, video gets several days—along with lithography, advertising, and photography. Typically then, media is taught as an agglomeration of technologies and techniques.

*The World Television Makes* begins with selections from three in-school video media programs. These excerpts span a range of approaches from a representative mass communications program in Alabama, to another in Rhode Island<sup>3</sup>, to a third, more recent program in Massachusetts that attempts to integrate video into other curricula with a stated aim of developing "critical viewing activities," "Critical viewing" is obviously a leap from vocational training, implying a development beyond teaching television as simply a technology to a consideration of its role as a vital cultural form. Could "critical viewing" then be aligned with that rather elusive category "media literacy"?

One thing has become apparent through organizing the *Teaching TV* show—there is little real agreement about what "media literacy" is. In a mission statement, the newsletter *Strategies for Media Literacy* defines media literacy as "critical analysis skills" brought to the "communication process" to "better understand the structure, content and function of mass media."<sup>4</sup> The Southwest Alternate Media Program (SWAMP) defines it more ambiguously as the capacity to respond to and create representations, relating to an expressive use of the technology as an "art form" and a "tool of self-expression."<sup>5</sup> This is echoed by a number of other researchers and educators. As to the expressed goals of "media literacy" they range from an expectation that "children would be more inclined to view quality material"<sup>6</sup> to the extraordinary claim that "a single media literate receiver has as much power as the senders of information to use media as a tool for understanding."<sup>7</sup> This final over-statement points to an endemic tendency in current media education to avoid any real institutional critique of media. After all, no single "receiver" can critically read their way out of a world where political, social, and economic agendas are set not only by powerful media interests, but by other institutions as well. With so many contradictory definitions of media literacy existing even in this relatively small sample,

it is evident that there is a need to articulate a methodology of media literacy more clearly—which indeed is one of the purposes of *Teaching Television*.

Several of the tapes included in this segment reflect the shortcomings of the current formulations of “media literacy.” The limitations of the expressive model preferred by SWAMP are evident in that the programs tend to individualize the students’ responses to media. In their first pilot program, *Video Adventures*, produced with a local NBC affiliate, we hear a student say, “You have the ultimate power, you can turn the TV off;”<sup>8</sup> or in analysis of video art, it is stated such work “means different things to different people.” This emphasis on individual choice leads to a moment of clear contradiction, revealed in a scripted exchange between the student hosts:

A: “You should be out playing!”

B: “Wait! Watch this next segment first.”

Also included in the third program, *Media Zone* is a segment from *The Real Deal*. Like *Video Adventures*, it is intended for broadcast distribution. *Media Zone* attempts an explicit critique of the politics of images, focusing on how media represents Asians. Unfortunately, the program identifies the media as the single cause of an effect—in this case, racist stereotyping. While both of these programs ask the questions “who says what, how, to whom, and with what effect,” they exclude the question of intention. Raymond Williams has pointed out that this is a fundamental omission which ultimately obscures “all real social and cultural processes.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to suggest rephrasing the question to say “who says what, how, to whom, with what effect and for what purpose.”

Of the work included in this section, only *Torn Between Colors* answers all of Williams’ questions. In its full-length version, *Torn Between Colors* couples a careful semiotic reading of media images of the defendants in the Bensonhurst murder trial and the defendants in the Central Park rape trial with a broader historical and class analysis on the construction of racism. In this program one model for “media literacy” emerges. It would certainly be possible to use similar strategies in critically analyzing everything from cop shows to advertising. Perhaps by encouraging such analysis we could move “critical viewing” beyond the point of admonishing students to be better consumers to a critique of consumerism itself, and beyond, to the development of meaningful alternatives.

#### PROGRAM 4 Other Schools: *Student Producers in the Community*

The Northwest Film and Video Center’s animated short, *Outward Bound*, provides an apt metaphor for the goals of teaching media. The tape begins with filmed portraits of the student producers and cuts to draw self-portraits of each, to a drawing of the school, cutting from that to a map of the city, then in succession, the county, the state, the country, and the globe. The last program of *Teaching TV*, *Other Schools*, is devoted to work that takes students out of the classroom, locating them in relationship to the wider community. These tapes challenge us to rethink our notions of where education begins and ends.

Too often teachers and students remain isolated in classrooms, further divided by course designations, students’ ages, and various classifications based on the students’ perceived abilities. These divisions are underwritten by a generalized emphasis on competition and individual achievement. In contrast, much of the work in *Other Schools* suggests a collective approach to teaching and learning. *Just Say No...Narcotics Barricade*, for instance, was produced by students from two classes in different course areas at the Thomas Jefferson High School Humanitas Program. Working with the general theme of civil rights, the students chose to investigate an issue of immediate concern to their community, a Los Angeles Police Department anti-drug initiative that included the cordoning off of an entire residential area. A similar approach is taken in the Educational Video Center’s *2317 Second Avenue: An East Harlem Story* in which a student documents the shocking conditions in the building where she and her family live. Through the course of taping the young producer organizes tenants by circulating a petition which is then presented to the landlord. Clearly, the tape tells us that the power to represent is tied to other forms of power, in this case giving the student and her neighbors both a means to speak and to act.

The work of Appalshop represents one of the most comprehensive attempts to integrate media production and education in a community. Founded in Whitesburg, Kentucky in 1969 as a cultural workshop, it has grown to include independent film production, a recording company, a gallery and a regular radio and public television program. In Appalshop’s project culture is understood as encompassing the everyday life of a people. Works such as *Mountain Haint Tales*, a series of ghost stories related by local elders, reflect Appalshop’s continuing concern to educate both their students and people outside the region about the mountains and the social ties of Appalachia’s communities.<sup>10</sup>

While many of the works in this last section of *Teaching TV* are very accomplished, few of the programs they were produced within set out to train professional producers. It is still significant, however, that young producers are being trained, and that many of them are working class and students of color who traditionally haven't had access to an education in media. Their eventual participation as professionals can only help to push the worlds of industry and independent production into reconsidering their exclusions and distortions.

In the last ten years, there has been a significant narrowing of the popular terms of debate regarding the public education system. We've all heard the argument from the pundits of instrumental reason, that to "keep America competitive" we must teach our youth the basics, by which they mean science and math. From the educational fundamentalists (Allan Bloom, William Bennett, et al.) we are told that we must return to an imaginary past when education had a clear purpose—the teaching of a shared set of values manifest most clearly in a literary canon which, not incidentally, is Western, white, and mostly male. My aim is not to dismiss or to detail these positions. Rather suffice it to say that they reveal education for what it is: a profoundly political terrain where central conflicts of the culture at large are played out. I think, for instance, that "remaining competitive" reflects the priorities and anxieties of American business in an almost 20 year period of economic instability and decline. Likewise, a return to the canon has to be seen in relation to the sustained critique of privilege based on gender, race and class brought about by feminism and the movements by people of color for self-determination both here and abroad.

We must insistently re-politicize in education what these and other conservative theories would have us believe is commonsense. Likewise—to paraphrase Martha Wallner of Deep Dish TV—we must re-learn our relationship to media, to begin to see it as an area of struggle, an area of contestation with significant stakes.<sup>11</sup> In the end, *Teaching TV* is about doing just that, namely reconsidering both education and media in a relationship which can transform the practice and experience of both.

Notes:

1. Michelle Mattleart, "Education, Television, and Mass Culture: Reflections on Research into Innovation," in *Television in Transition*, eds. Phillip Drummond and Richard Patterson (London: British Film Institute Books, 1985), p.175.
2. John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p.254-255.
3. Both the Carver Center for Creative and Performing Arts and Hope High School produce regular programming for local cable channels. In addition, Carver students also produce advertising for local companies.
4. Strategies for Media Literacy, Inc. "Mission Statement," (San Francisco, n.d.).
5. Southwest Alternate Media Project, "Media Arts Education Programs for Young People," (Houston, TX, n.d.) p. 2.
6. Debra Shore quoting Robert Kubey, Assistant Professor in Communications at Rutgers University in "TV or Not TV?: Turning Teachers on to Media Literacy," *Teacher Magazine* (May, 1990).
7. Strategies for Media Literacy, Inc.
8. *Video Adventures* includes segments produced by students in various programs across the country. This quote is from *Television Magic* by Meadowbrook Elementary School in Minnesota.
9. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975) p. 120.
10. Austin Allen, "Appalshop," *Dialogue* (May/June 1990) p. 14.
11. In conversation with the author.
12. Thanks to Annie Goldson and Micki McGee for their editorial assistance and to YTV? for their support and discussion.

The logo for Artists Space, featuring the words "Artists" and "Space" stacked vertically in a white, serif font against a black rectangular background.