

Learning From Video Is NOT Watching TV

Joann Flick
Agency for Instructional Technology
February 2005

jflick@ait.net

Even as motion picture technology debuted in the early 20th Century, the potential of motion media (movies, TV, video, DVD's) for instruction were observed, but the importance of the instructional environment and of the activities surrounding viewing were not. Thomas Alva Edison mistakenly predicted that motion pictures would soon replace teachers altogether. Now we know that educators have a critical role in the selection of media. Educators must select media with ethics and instructional methodology in mind, to best meet the instructional needs of learners.

It wasn't until the third quarter of the 20th Century that the role of the instructional design of media and the corresponding role of the instructor's method of teaching with the media came to be more fully understood. Now, we know that all children learn better when a variety of media are used in instruction and when related activities help them process and assimilate new information. There is a distinct difference between instructional media and commercial entertainment media. However, recently, there have been many more "edutainment" programs available through cable television and home video outlets. How can an educator choose materials that are appropriate and will help their students to learn?

This article points out the elements that educators should look for when selecting video products to use for instruction.

#1 The instructional design of the video

-length: Is the length appropriate to the amount of information presented? Instructional programs are usually shorter than programs created for entertainment. The shorter length takes into account the need to do more than just watch the program in order to effect learning. Since video is such a rich medium, the brain requires a change in stimulus in order to process all the information and to connect what it presented on screen with previous knowledge and experience. Longer videos can result in over-stimulating the brain, causing the viewer to become more passive and not to engage in trying to process what they are viewing.

-natural pause points: Look for a program that has obvious breaks or segments that allow learners to pause from viewing to discuss what they have just learned or to predict what might happen next. Videos that help the learner phrase questions about the subject often do so with embedded pause points.

-engages the viewer in active viewing: The video should present information in a way that is just not easily done through a hands-on experience. It should offer a window to a world beyond the child's experience and explore new information in a way that inspires learning and inquisitiveness. The traditional entertainment form of motion media is a narrative story with a tidy ending, but really good instructional media presents information and challenges the viewer to learn more on their own.

-provides helpful analogies taking advantage of the visual medium: The unique properties of motion media where visuals and sounds are combined should be used to benefit the instruction. Look for extraordinary graphics and maps, special effects that explore a concept in a unique way or editing that relates information so that it is more easily understood.

-places the information into a broader real-world context:

-appropriate language and style to the age of the learner

-provides opportunities to review and to see the information explored in a new way

#2 The quality of the video

-audio: Is everything clear and easily understood?

-scripts: Is the main idea evident? The presentation of information should follow a logical path from simpler ideas to more complex ones. The information should be correct and neither omitting critical details nor overstating the facts.

-video: Are the pictures on the screen useful in presenting the information or is most of the program taken up with incidental material? Is the style of the video appropriate and effective? Is it easy to see details when they are important?

-characters: Characters and setting play an important role as learners experiences with entertainment television can often lead them to become lost in the story and miss the important instructional elements. It is important to notice who in the video is given the primary voice and whether or not what that character or narrator says is appropriate to the subject and the age level of the learner. Reject videos that present any cultural stereotypes. Look for materials where the characters are also appropriate role models for your children.

#3 Ancillary materials

-teacher's guide: If the video does not come with a printed or printable teacher's guide, it is probably not designed for instruction. The teacher guide should include a synopsis of each program, key words and concepts and suggested activities to accompany viewing. Many teacher guides include bibliographies and worksheets.

-student's guide: Some instructional videos include a student guide which will include worksheets, background information to read and directions for hands-on activities or investigations.

-Web site: Often, a Web site may accompany the video and will include all the information found in a teacher's guide along with links to additional resources, scripts of programs, and even some online learning activities.

#4 Purpose & Intent

-Purpose: Is the primary purpose of the media to instruct learners of a stated age and grade level? Media created specifically to entertain may be very useful for instruction, but educators must be mindful that instructional value is not eclipsed by entertainment. Classroom settings require media that is specifically targeted and appropriate to the learners.

-Intent: Reject programs where the producer or funder may have commercial state in the presentation of the media. It is widely understood that motion media readily influences the viewer's attitudes and opinions, therefore, educators have to be very mindful of messages presented onscreen that may be intended to influence, rather than to inform.

-Source: Select media from reputable distributors and inquire about the producer and their funding.

-Sponsorship and advertising: Seek media that has no commercial sponsorships. If educators choose to use media that is sponsored by a commercial entity, they should avoid displaying any advertising at the beginning of the programs. After all, students will likely associate the teacher's selection of the media as an endorsement of the product. Avoid media where products are featured in the body of the program.