THE EVOLUTION OF MASS MEDIA COURSES

Bob Miller

In the early 1950's when educational television made its debut on the American scene, the prophets of progress were vociferous in their predictions that education, and most particularly adult education, was about to be revolutionized. With the establishment of channels devoted solely to uplift and education, we were convinced that every home could become a classroom. We were equally convinced that every home wanted to become a classroom. Demonstrating a naiveté that is remarkable in retrospect, educators all around the country were positive that all that was needed was to put a "great teacher" in front of the camera to share his erudition and automatically the masses would switch channels; Howdy Doody would be dead and Ed Sullivan would be left to view his animal acts by himself. We transferred the professors and their desks and blackboards from the classroom to the television studio, turned on cameras and we were in business. In a relatively short period of time, we learned painfully that in the manner of Berkeley's falling tree, media is mass media only if there are sets turned on at the receiving end. (This writer recalls with chagrin one of his own contributions to killing education by TV in the form of a sleep-inducing course in time and motion study.) With the exception of a few notable successes, such as Chicago's TV College, television as a means for formal adult education was largely abandoned.

Despite this general historical background, the College of Continuing Education and Community Service, in an effort to further expand its services to the communities throughout the State, decided in the fall of 1971 to offer a course by television. This first experimental offering was a course in futuristics. Response to this course (225 registered students) while not overwhelming was sufficiently encouraging to continue development of courses by media. The futuristics course was followed by another television course, this one in human sexuality, which attracted over five hundred students. With the assurance that there is a need and desire for courses by media, the Mass Media Program has continued to expand and to broaden its base by developing courses that utilize and combine mixed modes of media so that it can include courses by television, radio, and newspaper. As of the beginning of July '74, the program has offered five courses for credit which have serviced over 1,600 students.

During fiscal year '74-75, four new courses will be offered and plans for the future are for an increased number of offerings. In light of previous experience in other parts of the country and a few earlier attempts to use media here, a closer examination of the reasons for the relative success of the current media program is merited.

Selection of Courses

In selecting courses to be presented through the use of media, one of the most fundamental guidelines has been that the subject matter be of broad general interest. Apart from the obvious fact that general interest courses will attract more registered students, CCECS feels that they should be performing a dual function. As credit courses, they are so designed that interested viewers and listeners can register, and by doing the required extra work involved, can earn two or three college credits. In addition, they are selected and designed to attract that portion of the general public who are interested in learning for learning's sake even if they do not want to earn college credit. By keeping in mind the auditor's interests as well as the student for credit, the College fulfills its dual mission of education and community service. Courses offered thus far have included: two in futuristics — Tuning to the Future, a course by television, and America and the Future of Man, a course by television and radio; one in sex education — Human Sexuality, a course by television; one in psychology — Understanding Children: A Primer for Adults, a course by radio and television; and one in religion — Charisma of the Cults, a course by radio. By the time this appears in print, two more courses will be under way. They are: one in sociology — Television as Mirror and Molder, a course by radio and television; and In Search of the American Dream, a course by newspaper.

In addition to the reasons cited above, the very fact of using mass media carries with it almost a moral obligation to select material that will be of interest to the greatest number of people. All of the courses mentioned have attracted a substantial number of "auditors" as well as
registered students. Many parents and teachers tuned in on the course in psychology simply in the interest of better understanding their own children. Commercial television ratings taken at the time we were running the course in human sexuality indicated that the general viewing audience for that series was one of the largest the local ETV station had ever attracted for a locally produced series. In addition, mail and word of mouth feedback showed that viewing the series was a family activity for many families, particularly those with teenagers.

The careful selection of instructors for the courses offered has proven to be an equally important factor in their success. Courses by media, particularly the electronic media, make special demands on the instructors. They must be capable of adapting to the sometimes almost dictatorial requirements of the technology itself. And it requires on their part a willingness, indeed an eagerness, to use the media in a creative and positive manner. For public broadcast the days of simply transplanting the classroom to the studio are long gone. Although some of the courses we have offered have been courses that the instructor had taught previously in the traditional classroom manner, all of them have been redesigned for media and, within necessary budgetary limitations, have been produced to incorporate "production values" and make maximal use of the teaching potentials of the media itself. One of them, Television as Mirror and Molder, is a completely new course designed specifically for media.

Production Values

When the average viewer turns on the television set or radio, he is by long experience psychologically conditioned to expect entertainment. This has a definite effect in presenting credit courses. Even though the student is tuning-in to follow a credit course, the psychological set is there. A straight forward classroom-style lecture will turn off all but the most highly motivated student; and even with the highly motivated, there is danger of lulling them to sleep. While courses by media need not, nor should not, be laugh-in presentations, nevertheless laugh-in techniques can be judiciously used to enhance presentation and to give added impact to the educational content. By treating the electronic media as a creative tool in itself rather than just a transmittal device, new dimensions are added. Quality is increased and, most important, attention is held. In television courses in particular, we can tear down the classroom walls completely. Through good use of film and mobile TV techniques, we can put the instructor where it is happening, rather than relying on secondhand illustration which is the best that can be achieved with audio-visual techniques inside the classroom. We can in effect create total environmental visual impact. For example, in one lesson of our course Tune to the Future, in which we were dealing with over-population and its attendant ills, in a section on noise pollution we put the instructor on a medial in the freeway at the height of rush-hour traffic and filmed him delivering his lecture while the traffic rushed by and the noise all but drowned out his remarks, thus driving home the point of his remarks in a manner that never could be achieved in the classroom. In short, the creative use of media for teaching is limited only by the imagination of the instructor-producer-director team and, sadly, I confess, by budget limitations.

Good use of radio for courses also adds new dimensions. On all of our radio courses we have used a dialogue approach which helps create interest. In all but one which was taught on a team basis, the dialogue has been between the prime instructor and guests who range from academic specialists in specific areas to "just plain folks" who have particular knowledge or experience. Granted this could conceivably be done in the classroom, but it can be better done on radio since we can pre-tape to accommodate a particular guest's own timetable. Also by using the lure of reaching a mass audience, we are able to obtain guests who might be reluctant to take the time to come out to a small class. And by using tape we can obtain special guests who geographically are unavailable otherwise. Since audio cassettes are relatively inexpensive and possessed by most students, the radio allows greater flexibility for the students' own scheduling. If they are not available at the time the course is on the radio, they can have someone tape it for them. Or they can go to one of the several listening centers where we keep tapes of the lessons on deposit and listen to it at their own leisure.

Promotion and Advertising

General interest level, choosing the best of instructors, and paying attention to production values are of utmost importance; but they alone do not ensure the success of a media program. One of the biggest mistakes made in the early days of ETV was the tendency to operate on the assumption (unproven) that there was a tremendous mass of people out there desperately yearning for the cultural boost and educational uplift that ETV could provide. The vision of Everyman turning in gratitude from Falstaff and football to Shakespeare and Falstaff was one dear to the programmer's heart. As those of us who cherished that belief learned to our chagrin, it just didn't automatically happen, if it happened at all. Adult education on a broad scale needs to be sold just as surely as any other product. Fortunately, it is a product we can take pride in selling. Promotion and advertising on all levels have been integral to the media program. In this respect the very nature of the program has a built-in advantage. The fact
that the courses are done by media and are constantly on
view creates an awareness of them in itself. In addition,
since they are a part of the programming of the radio and
TV stations used, and the newspaper in which they are
published, the media itself has a special vested interest in
helping with their promotion. Likewise, due to their
public nature and easy accessibility, students who are
uncertain about taking them have a chance to sample
them before committing themselves. For this reason we
keep registration open longer than usual and make the
process easier through registration by mail.

Student Reaction
Numbers of students registered for the courses are an
important factor; but in the final analysis, the key factor in
evaluating the success of the program must lie in the
experience gained by the student. Lacking constant
person to person feedback, it has been especially
important to develop feedback techniques that keep us
constantly informed on how well we are doing. When we
began the media program, we felt that availability to
students of occasional live contact sessions would be
highly important. Rather surprisingly we have learned that
the majority of the students do not want or feel a
special need for contact sessions. In our surveys of
students taking media courses, the majority of them have
listed the convenience of taking the course at home as a
prime reason for registering. Despite the comparative
smallness of Oahu and relative convenience of travel,
there seems to be a reluctance to come out to contact
sessions. Perhaps at some time in the future, a study of the
reasons for this might be of interest, particularly in light of
the fact that a high percentage of the media students
reside in areas most easily accessible to the Manoa
Campus. However, for the convenience of the students
who do want personal contact with the instructors, we do
continue to schedule contact sessions on a
non-obligatory basis. Students taking advantage of these
range from about ten to twenty-five percent. On the
television and radio course we have built in two-way
communication by telephone. On the radio courses in
particular, the last half hour is given to availability by
phone of direct conversation with the instructor and his
guests. This has not proven to be as satisfactory as we had
hoped, as many of the students are shy about making use
of this public technique. What has proven more
satisfactory from the students' standpoint has been the
establishment of telephone office hours each week at a
set time when the students are free to call the instructors
for private consultation. In addition, the students are free
to call the administrative coordinator at any time during
normal working hours. This has proven to be a way of
getting very honest feedback since the students seem to
feel freer to express their criticisms to the administrative
coordinator than they would to the instructor himself.
Since many of the questions they have deal with purely
mechanical aspects of the course, the availability of the
administrative coordinator to answer them also allows
the instructor to concentrate his consultation time on
purely academic aspects. Other evaluative and feedback
techniques that have been built into the courses include
critiques of the individual lessons by students on a ran­
dom sampling basis, and pre-evaluation and post-evalua­
tion tests designed not for grading purposes but
simply to give us an index of the learning process that has
taken place.

On all but one of the courses given to date, the
completion rate has been above ninety percent. The
exception was the first newspaper course which was
completed by 87% of the students. Overall, the
instructors of the courses reported an exceptionally high
quality level on the project reports and papers required of
the students for credit.

Future of the Media Program
Encouraged by the ongoing success of the courses by
media, the program is planning to expand its offerings. To
date the program has been a one-man operation and this
has necessarily limited the number of quality courses that
can be offered.

It must also be noted that the use of media for credit
courses is also limited by economic factors, particularly
the cost of television. Aside from the reasons offered
earlier, courses must remain in the general interest area
simply to attract the necessary number of students to
make them cost-effective. For example, despite the
phenomenally high number of students (538) registered
for the human sexuality course, the course did not on its
first offering recoup the production costs involved.
Subsequent reofferings of the course which is now on
permanent video tape could eventually make it pay its
way. Since costs vary according to the media used, one
way of continuing them and still making them
economically feasible is the use of mixed media, a
direction in which we are currently moving. This means
analyzing the courses to determine which portions of
them can be most effectively done by television, which
by radio or audio cassette, which by print, and coming up
with the proper combinations that will make the course
most effective educationally. Aside from economic
considerations, this kind of analysis and subsequent
mixed media approach will improve the overall quality of
the courses. Another approach that holds most exciting
possibilities is the creation of general interest courses by
organizing readily accessible and already produced
materials into a meaningful course structure. An example


of this is the new sociology course, *Television as Mirror and Molder*, which will incorporate viewing of commercial television programs on a guided basis as a major portion of the course.

Still, the need for staying within the general interest area, the need for large numbers of registrants, and the goal of fulfilling a dual function and maintaining interest for the general public would seem to preclude the possibility of using media courses to lead to a degree program, and would seem to limit it to random offerings of glamour courses.

However, recent developments may make possible an even broader use of media and portend a brighter future for adult education by media. I refer to the planning now in progress for the Hawaii Open Program and the development and growth of cable television here in Hawaii.

The Hawaii Open Program is the official title of off-campus oriented programs utilizing nontraditional study methods leading to a degree. This Program plans on heavy use of media of all sorts.

Cable television is beginning to expand and will be, in the very near future, available throughout the State. Furthermore, in the near future the technical means of linking up all the cable TV systems will be available thus giving us a potential statewide network of CTV. The peculiar geographical nature of Hawaii makes it likely that CTV services will be subscribed to by a high percentage of the population. Of special importance to the future of adult education by media is the requirement by the FCC that CTV stations make available one of their many channels for the exclusive use of education. In their own self-interest of attracting more subscribers by offering special programs that are not available elsewhere, the CTV operators are for the most part, eager for programs to be supplied to fill their educational channels. Also education by television is more possible to do on CTV because of the lower production costs involved.

But perhaps most important of all, because of the number of channels available, the use of CTV for courses offers much more flexibility. One channel reserved just for education will also allow greater flexibility in programs. Courses can be scheduled for repeats at different hours. A choice of times to view the lessons allows greater flexibility for the students own schedule. Students who might not be willing or able to commit themselves to one set time-period a week for a course may be much more willing to take courses when they can fit them into their own schedule. Since each cable TV serves a specific community, courses can be tailored to meet the needs of that particular community. The subscription lists of the CTV companies will make it more possible to do accurate surveys of the specific needs of any given community. It also offers the possibility of offering courses for small numbers of students who are geographically remote from educational opportunity. Under the condition of a public broadcasting station with only one channel for the whole state, it would be almost morally reprehensible to broadcast basic courses done in a strictly classroom-on-the-air manner, courses which neither in content nor manner of production would hold the interest of the majority of viewers. However, CTV with its numerous channels and specific-community orientation could be used for this and it could be done inexpensively.

Cable TV also carries the potential for two-way communication. At present the technological costs of utilizing this potential doesn't make this too important a factor in the use of CTV for education; but certainly in the not too distant future, it will be important.

One other bright spot in the future use of media is the growing revival of interest in radio. At present we are using commercial radio, thanks to the public-spirited cooperation of radio station KORL. For the future, however, there is the possibility of the Hawaii Public Broadcasting Authority implementing its franchise to establish a public radio station, a possibility that would give us greatly increased outlets.

In addition to the cooperation of a commercial radio station making possible our use of radio for media courses, it should also be noted that newspaper courses are possible only because of the public-spirited cooperation of the Honolulu Advertiser.

To sum up, our experience in the past three years has proven beyond a doubt that there are a substantial number of people willing and eager to learn through media and that good courses can be provided by media. We are now at the point where the technology is available to do anything we want. The question "Can we do it?" no longer has any meaning. The only meaningful question is, "What do we want to do?" The failures of the early attempts to use media for adult education were the learning experiences that brought us to where we are today. Where we will be tomorrow is only as limited as our imaginations. As John McHale has said, "The past of the future is now," so now, let us get on with tomorrow.

Bob Miller has been with the College of Continuing Education as Mass Media Specialist for the past four years. He was a television producer/director for fifteen years working both in educational television in St. Louis and American Samoa and in commercial television with CBS. He was an actor for a number of years, has published one volume of poetry and is a graduate of Kenyon College.