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Video and Presentation Technologies

Video Literacy Series: What Video Does Well in Education–and What It Doesn't

By Barry Hampe

Television's undeniable appeal to a large audience does not mean that video is a panacea for educational presentations. There's a reason TV has a history channel, an arts channel, and even a food channel, but not a philosophy channel.

As with any other medium, video has its weaknesses as well as its strengths. When you plan to use video as part of a presentation to students, you had better be aware of both, because your students are.

In the early days of video, there were a lot of grant-supported experiments in the use of video in education. What many educators wanted to do was to videotape a master teacher conducting a class, and then play the tape for other classes. Actually, that gave the students the worst of two worlds. They lost the interactivity of a live teacher working with a live class able to answer students' questions and personalize the class for them. And they also lost video's ability to provide demonstrations and visual evidence, and to condense and intensify information though editing. Videotaping a teacher conducting a class is no more creating an educational video than is videotaping the pages of a book and asking the audience to read it from the screen. It is merely shoveling the content of one medium into another.

On the other hand, the videotape of the master teacher might have been a good demonstration piece to use for training other teachers. In that case, the content of the video would become how a master teacher works with a class, rather than a lesson in history, botany, or whatever subject the teacher was trying to get across to students. The point is that presentation video will always work best if you'll keep in mind what video does well and what it does poorly.

What are Video's Strengths?

Educators who use video to present and supplement course material should realize that their success may hinge on their ability to leverage video's strong points.

Visual Demonstration. Video is great at showing how things work. From its earliest days, television has played upon the ability of the medium to demonstrate products effectively. And educators can use this property to make concepts clear to students. Anything that can be shown, can be shown on video. For example, video is superb at demonstrating how scientific principles work. Video can let an entire group look through a microscope

at a critical moment or watch a long, slow biological process in time lapse photography. One of the best little educational films I have ever seen was called "Colonial Cooper." Made at Colonial Williamsburg, it showed how an 18th century artisan made a barrel. If you have ever watched a skilled craftsman at work, you know how fascinating this can be.

Video can take an audience where they could not easily go and show them what they otherwise might never have a chance to see. A good anthropological documentary can take your students into the jungles of New Guinea or the tundra of the frozen arctic or anywhere else on earth to observe how the people there are different from and similar to the folks at home.

Dramatization. Video–and movies–have the power to hold an audience spellbound as a human drama unfolds before their eyes. And many educators use clips from films to dramatize for their students important events in history, significant moments from the biographies of key figures, excerpts from literature (the plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, and Simon were meant to be seen and heard, not read), and even examples of various psychological states.

The marriage of computers and video has made it possible to create and animate charts and graphs, breathing life into what might otherwise seem to be dull, dry figures. Presentations dealing with statistics can put an audience to sleep, not because the information is boring–statistics often reveal exciting truths–but because the audience can't really follow how the statistics develop the story. With good colorful graphics and a little bit of animation, you can show your audience how 10 percent of the people in Group A have made a change which moves most of them to Group B and some to Group C. The audience will immediately see on the screen that Group A has gotten smaller while B and C have grown larger. As the statistics become more complicated and the relationships more complex, video can simplify the process visually so that your students stay with you.

Animated video can also allow us to create a visual analog for events that occur outside the world of normal videography. We've all seen network animation of a space shuttle docking. This is an event that actually occurs in the real world, but where there may be no video camera outside the spacecraft to show us what happens.

Presenting Visual Evidence. Video is also, obviously, the primary medium for documenting real events and bringing their substance to an audience. One or two people with a video camera and some sound gear can go where an audience of hundreds or thousands not only wouldn't fit but might not be welcome. You can't take a crowd along to shoot the behavior of animals in the wild. And most of us will never take a safari to Africa or spend several months in the Alaska bush to see it for ourselves.

Video can also make experiences accessible to an audience that they have simply never noticed. I made a documentary about the way young children learn for a teacher training project in early childhood education. We recorded kids from a few weeks old up

to the age of five to show the tremendous amount of learning that takes place long before a child ever sets foot in a classroom. We did it with a three-person crew, shooting everywhere from a local park to a bathroom where a thirteen-month-old boy was taking a bath–all within twenty-five miles of our production office.

With this documentary we made accessible to teachers on four continents a view of young children that most had never seen before. A Young Child Is . . . was a breakthrough at the time, because it showed young children doing whatever they chose to do. Until then, most documentaries on early childhood were scripted by an academic expert and shot to illustrate whatever theories the expert propounded.

And that's the point about visual evidence. It's a record of what is, not an illustration. So it has to be shot and presented truthfully.

Making an Emotional Appeal. While most academic presentations are meant to be rational rather than emotional, whenever there is an element of emotion in your presentation, video can help. It works well as an emotional medium, using the elements of dramatization and demonstration along with music and powerful visual evidence to evoke strong feelings in an audience.

In the realm of the emotions, a picture often is worth a thousand words. The incredible photographs and documentaries made during the Great Depression, for example, bring the hardships of that era to life for students who have never known hard times.

Well made video often lets us observe the emotions people are experiencing at a specific time: a mother seeing her newborn baby for the first time, an athlete at the moment of victory (or defeat), the pride of a young child who has accomplished something for the first time, a family's sorrow at the death of a loved one.

What are Video's Weaknesses?

Video shines when it deals with the visual, the dramatic, and the emotional. Unfortunately it becomes much less effective when it gets away from those strong points. You need to be aware that video is not especially good at verbal presentations, at presenting abstract, nonvisual information, or at making an intellectual argument.

Talk Talk Talk.

There has been an unfortunate tendency in recent years to create video programs which consist of nothing but people talking. Certainly, if the speaker is someone the audience would stand in line to hear anyway, this can be quite interesting. But in spite of the many talk shows on TV, video is not a great oral medium. The network talk shows are, after all, a form of stylized entertainment dealing primarily in emotion. Even the current events programs on CNN and MSNBC are more about confrontation than communication. You have no trouble in telling who is mad at whom, but you may be hard put to understand why.

Taping someone talking is usually the least interesting thing one can do with video for a presentation. A major problem is simply the medium's limited ability to handle words. Ten minutes of videotaped conversation will probably contain a thousand words or less. That's not a lot. And the words are unedited speech, full of umms and ahs, incomplete sentences (and thoughts), and all the bumps in the road we associate with spontaneous talk. Taping a lot of people talking is often little more than noise–hard to follow and not very informative.

In spite of what you often see on the documentary channels, interviews do not a documentary make, because they don't show the topic; they show people talking about the topic. So try to avoid the interview trap. The interview usually won't be nearly as good as you had hoped.

Obviously, if you have a great, short piece of video with someone of importance to your presentation saying exactly what you want your audience to hear, use it. What could be better? But do a reality check first. Make sure it's as good as you think it is, by showing it to one or more people who are representative of your audience. If they agree it's interesting, go with it. If they are lukewarm about the clip, it might be better to leave it out.

Presenting Abstract, Nonvisual Information. Video is generally poor at presenting abstract information when the information does not lend itself to some kind of visual treatment. The preferred medium for words alone is the book, not the video. Economics, for example, has not been well treated on television. Nor has philosophical thought. These topics usually don't present themselves visually at any meaningful level. Following abstract thought usually requires knowledge of a lot of background information that does not come across easily on video.

And that's why there is a history channel but no mathematics channel. History is a story that can be dramatized. Mathematics must be learned and practiced. I'm not saying it can't be done. But I am saying it usually hasn't been done well, mainly because the medium does not lend itself readily to this kind of information.

Intellectual Argument. Unless an intellectual argument can be made with visual evidence, it will be hard to make on video. Almost any kind of intellectual exercise dependent on prior knowledge and the manipulation of ideas has usually not been well handled using television. Among other things, it simply takes too long. And to follow the argument, the audience must know nearly as much about the subject as the people on the screen.

Besides, the intellectual argument in your presentation is your presentation. The video you will be using should be evidence in support of your argument. If it isn't, it probably doesn't belong in the presentation.

Using video in a presentation means playing to its strengths and avoiding its weaknesses. It's a visual medium. That which is not visual won't show up on the screen. And efforts to force a nonvisual presentation into video are likely to waste your time and frustrate your audience.

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