Videotape: Infolding Information

Replay time. Six neighborhood Youth Corps kids from Brooklyn and I are watching videotapes we took at a state park in Jersey. Don Herd is smiling and threading his tape: "Wait'll you guys see this. Wait'll you see it." He had fought with the group and had gone off alone into the woods with one of the two half - inch battery portables we were using. The tube shows trees, shaky trees. Fifteen minutes into the twenty-minute tape and we're bored.
"You haven't seen it yet!"
"Seen what, seen what?"
"The best part. Wait, just wait . . . here it comes now, here it comes." He's squeaking with delight and he's serious.
The camera pans shakily around an open field. Suddenly out of focus and grinning, Don Herd himself. A shy laugh from the tube. The camera slides off the face, hesitates, and comes home to rest on the happy face of Don Herd.

This experience of Don Herd had a kind of coherence and completeness hardly possible for him and his classmates in the present school system. Classroom space and clock time condemn them to a three-dimensional game of tick-tack-toe in which experience is blocked out by time schedules and movement from classroom to classroom, a game in which there is very little coherence.

Into the grid of this game ETV (Educational Television replete with the playback capacity of videotape recorders) entered, enthusiastic. This system could do the old job better. One ad for the video tape recorder, VTR, calls it the "incredible

copying machine;" it lets you make "carbon copies of a single gifted teacher for the entire school system." X-space could be conquered by videotaping the lesson to be pigeonholed into the classroom at a convenient hour. X-Space. O-Time. And the game goes on.

Manufacturers entered into the game, enthusiastic. They encouraged the stenciling of the commercial television system, with its complex and costly traditions, onto the school system. The only difference was that now "educational" materials were being transmitted and you were working with a captured audience of kids rather than consumers to be captured—who at least had the indirect option of forcing a show off the air by not watching it.

Shoot first, ask questions later. So the new medium, videotape, masquerading as the incredible copying machine, has wedded itself to the physical fact of school buildings and their classrooms. The automatic bells ring out anniversary celebrations every forty-one and a half minutes. But the Don Herds are not happy.

ETV Audience as Researchers

Ten months of experimenting with videotape has convinced me that the bias of this medium is not to play three-dimensional tick-tack-toe. But before getting into the grammar of videotape itself and what it suggests for schools, I'd like to pass on an insight of McLuhan's applicable to ETV in general.

> …The classroom, as much as any other place, can become a scene in which the audience can perform an enormous amount of work. The

> audience as work force has unlimited possibilities. Suppose we were to brief fifty million people on some extremely difficult problems facing top-level scientists. Inevitably, some dozens, hundreds of the fifty million audience would see instantly through any type of opaque problem, even on the highest scientific levels. Robert Oppenheimer is fond of saying that "there are children playing in the street who could solve some of my top problems in physics because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago." There are enormous possibilities for using an audience as work force in scientific research, or any other type of research. It is simply that we insist on beaming instruction at them instead of allowing them to participate in the action of discovery (McLuhan 1966: 204).

ETV has taken from commercial television the metaphor of the audience as consumers of information. Programs are produced, packages are made, often of the classroom lecture. The students consume.

With next to no adaptation, present ETV facilities could change the role of the student from consumer to problems researchers. The X-ray capacity of the TV tube could be utilized to present the anatomy of real problems. This does not mean a journalistic report on a problem. Nor does it mean pseudo-problem-solving: urban air pollution is not solved by inhaling the country's atmosphere through a Salem cigarette. Presentation of real problems, like cancer research, could begin to take the place of prepackaged information.

TV facilities can transfer information over distance at high speeds to many people. With problem presentation, the more people reached quickly, the better the chances of solution. ETV could be a mass brainstorming media.

Sculpting Time and Space

VT is not TV. If anything, it's TV flipped into itself. Television, as the root of the word implies, has to do with transmitting information over distance. Videotape has to do with infolding information. Instant replay offers a living feedback that creates a topology of awareness other than the tick-tack-toe grid. Anthropologist Edmund Carpenter tells a story about two Eskimos who went on solo trips around an island. They were asked independently to draw maps of the island. Their maps were good replicas of the island, yet they both differed in one significant aspect. Each had camped and hunted near a certain cove, and that area on their maps was larger according to the length of time each had stayed there. Videotape creates a kind of Eskimo awareness of time-space. Especially with the half-inch battery-operated portables, one can sculpt time-space in accord with the contours of experience. Information can be infolded to enrich experience.

Participating in Your Own Audience Participation

With videotape, the performer and the audience can be one and the same, either simultaneously or sequentially. In an actor's class a student did a piece from *Spoon River Anthology* first without the monitor, with me shooting her face from a distance with a 1-10 zoom. Then she did the same piece facing into the monitor so she could see herself while performing. Delighted with both experiences, she said that she felt more secure facing the monitor than with me at a distance using the camera and no monitor. The distance shooting without monitor left her with no feedback other than the glassy-eyed lens. With her performance extended into the monitor, she was, to use McLuhan's phrase, "participating in her own audience participation." Feedback was immediate and

self-supplied. She could use simultaneously her expressive abilities as an actress and the set of responses she had as an ordinary theater goer. She could take in her own performance. Enter the talented audience. Add to this the dimension of instant replay and a new kind of performer is bound to develop.

This actress's sense of security and confidence with the monitor seems akin to my whole experience with videotape. I am developing a different sense of myself. Very much like the sense of myself I have when I swim lazily. Very much like the Chi sense of myself I have when doing some Tai Chi T'uan. I feel more able to move in my own fullness. And this awareness extends beyond the actual use of tape. Confidence seems almost to be a function of communicating with oneself.

Heart Transplant by Videocorder

VT offers image and sound feedback that creates a field richer than ordinary conversation. A marriage counselor uses videotape to play back to couples their conversations. Often dimensions are revealed outside the perimeter of the spoken word. On replay they may hear themselves saying they don't want anything to do with each other while at the same time they can see their arms open to each other in a simulated embrace. The old heart to heart seems to be more possible with videotape. Indeed, the label on the machine (videocorder) has as its root *cor* —"heart"—in the full rich sense of Newman's dictum *Cor ad cor loquitur* (Heart speaking to heart). Compare this with television's "Peyton Place."

Communicating With Oneself

In the Langley Porter Youth Drug Clinic for psychedelic dropouts in San Francisco they allow patient videotaping sessions in private. The patient is free to erase the tape or show it to someone of his choice. The patients testify that "it's a real trip." This kind of communicating with oneself has an implication of self-actualizing that goes far beyond mere self-discovery. A student, discussing the Columbia student strike with her fellows at lunch, ran up against such vehement cliched ignorance that she could not talk for fear of exploding into curses and tears. She went home and videotaped, without being monitored, what she would have said. Someone else played her fellow students' roles. Upon replay she was amazed but said little. The next day she spoke her mind at lunch calmly and firmly, without exploding.

Seeing herself speaking her mind live on tape opened up communication with herself about it. She could take in her own outside and consider it. The net result of this inner dialogue was the confidence to move in her own fullness, to actualize herself.

Videotape enables a person to be present to himself in a new way. This past summer an eleven-year-old black girl was hitching home from Star Lake summer camp. The counselor caught up with her. Her main complaint—"I'm ugly." He had the sense to take her to the VT setup and show her herself on tape. "Ooh, that's me, huh? Okay."

In a videotape marathon at Aureon Institute in the fall of '68, Steve Lawrence asked each member of the encounter group to introduce himself to the others while the camera taped him. He would play back the tape to the person

immediately. This worked to open up inner communication, thereby facilitating communication with the group. Comments ranged from "I don't like what I see; I see a whining baby," to "I like what I see. I mean I always thought of myself as peculiar, but I can see I'm put together like other people. Like anybody you'd see in a subway."

Strategy for Schools Feedback Process

Given this feedback capacity of videotape, it seems the best strategy for its use in present schools is as an ever-present service for both teachers and students, much like a telephone or a mirror. Half-inch, one-inch, even two-inch systems could be utilized in this way. Productions for audience research could be moved to more centralized locations where the budget is bigger and the talent thicker. This would free the TV studio to become a special space for infolding information. Portable units could provide the service in other parts of the building. Battery-operated units could be used for field trips and such.

Discussion groups, reading aloud, student performances, debates, cheerleading, dancing, self-evaluation for teachers (perhaps with the help of other teachers or students)— there is an inventory of processes in the school that might be enriched by the living feedback of instant replay.

The word "replay" is deceiving in a sense. As indicated above in the student discussion of the Columbia situation at lunch, videotape can function as instant *pre*play, as a simulation service. Students going for job or college interviews, making a presentation before the class or a public speech, could use videotape in this way. Such a feedback service would "from many a blunder free us." The

emphasis is on us. It's what's live, not what's on tape, that counts. The living process, not the product.

Between full feedback and packaged ;information lies a whole area of what George Hall, of the national Association of Educational Broadcasters, calls "interactive structuring of program materials," in which student response is itself part of the learning. With videotape this type of programming can grow much more sophisticated than the one stimulus, one response pattern. As Carol Headley, Director of the Fordham School of Education, points out, you must incorporate into your program the power the medium gives the student to "react to his own reactions."

Student Liberation by Information

Authority is based on information. Cybernetics and papal pronouncements have made that apparent. Upon introduction of a half-inch system into one school, the drama teacher complained, "Students are notoriously their own worst directors. If they start seeing themselves on tape, they'll start directing themselves." Her authority as director comes from a tradition she knows and observation of the students' performance in relation to that tradition. With the feedback from videotape, the students can take in their own outside, can take in information that increases their control over their performance. The director's role shifts toward that of a consultant, someone who offers perceptions from what is now an alien tradition.

There is a very real sense in which portable VTR is a complete cybernetic system. It is not part of a system like an 8-mm camera that needs the

drugstore developer; it is not like TV in your home which is only one terminus of a huge network. Portable VTR is a self-contained system for processing culture—family culture, classroom culture, therapeutic culture. It has input and output and can be operated without experts. It offers a completeness in itself. Those outside the closed circuit involvement are an audience once removed. Most likely, they are not interested in what is of vital importance to the "in" group. Steve Lawrence found that the broadcast ratings for therapy sessions on VTR in the Los Angeles area were abysmally low. With VTR it is wise to concentrate on the "in" culture and not harbor the secret hope that CBS might want to buy up rights for broadcast.

In the sense that a portable videotape recorder is a complete system in itself, it is structurally different from other VTR equipment. Much like the TV generation, which lives in radical cultural discontinuity claiming they must be father and mother to each other since they in fact have no cultural parents, so this small-user equipment is, from a user's point of view, completely new. It is its own baby.

Broadcast television in ten years will reap the fruit of the diversity and decentralization of portable video tape recorders in the hands of kids only to the extent that the centralized pattern is not stenciled onto these systems. One factor clearly works in favor of decentralization. The VTR systems of the different manufacturers are incompatible. There are fifteen or sixteen different formats. Electronic transfer can be made but only on expensive equipment. This will encourage small users to feedback to their own situations rather than feed off it for others.

Videotape in the Classroom

Classroom cultures can be revolutionized by VT. The shift in authority is one dimension. Students can take a much large part in the processing of information. What the kids dig most about school is other kids. Videotape can facilitate the learning from peers.

The underlying analogue of the classroom culture is book: teacher as chapter title and the kids as gutengerber babies all in rows. The title controls the content. The teacher with his subject matter controls the kids. The teacher is the type font of all knowledge, imprinting on the blank pages of the students' minds a continuous sequence of prepackaged knowledge called a lecture. His notes become their notes. Finishing the course is more important than dialogue. He works under the burden of a body of information to be transmitted. He is slave to the syllabus. Only questions "on the track" of the curriculum are acceptable.

Contrast the videotape format of "Laugh-In." As opposed to focus on one font of information, there are many focuses and many fonts. As opposed to continuity and moving along, there is discontinuity and repetition. The attention span required in a classroom for a straight lecture is forty some minutes.

The humanities class at Newburgh Free Academy in New York is experimenting with class format and small videotape. By giving each student an index card with a short bit on it, teachers Bob Pritchard, Antone Aquino, and Thomas Fry turn the class into a laugh-in, learn-in cast. A student tapes each bit with the hand-held battery portable which frees him from tripod perspective. Then instant replay. So far, instant, insane success.

It is hard to say what will happen to content in a course transformed by VTR. The Newburgh Humanities Program is currently using random bits like selling toothpaste, calling the garbage man, doing an ad for yourself. Perhaps the syllabus could be turned over to students the first day to be scripted for VTR. It may work. Videotape, however, seems to have more potential for exploring environments. I took a battery videotape and three Born Losers from Spanish Harlem to Resurrection City the weekend of Puerto Rican Day. They were so into shooting with the video camera that they didn't even stop to eat. They looked and learned. One gave me an extensive comparison between the cops in D.C. and the cops in New York that would stand up in any sociology text.

A teacher willing to bypass the lecture format in favor of a VT learn-in will find a deeper understanding of the commonplace tradition in oral cultures invaluable. Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* and the works of Walter Ong can be of great help here. John Cage's *Silence* and *A Year from Monday* tend to give one the courage to experiment with random compositions. It won't be long before the kids pick up on TV ads for clues as to how to present their bits.

"To Monitor or Not to Monitor"

The videocorder tends to divide process phenomena into those that lend themselves to simultaneous monitoring and those that do not. Putting on makeup, combing hair, shaving, *Spoon River* practice— these lend themselves to simultaneous monitoring. Other things, such as the classroom composition, work better without simultaneous monitoring. The monitor (from *moneo* meaning "warning") acts as a censor and inhibits the experience. In using

videotape equipment, it is necessary to understand the process at hand in these terms.

Self-Erasing, Self-Effacing

Once upon a time I had a teacher who considered the eraser to be the worst thing that ever happened to the pencil. He liked things thought out before they were written out. This defender of the pure pencil was on to something. An eraser creates a different style of thinking. Videotape is erasable. We can redo it if we don't like it. Since videotape has become available "live" TV is mostly tape, and it's different from television before videotape. Hugh Downs is among the many who defend pure television as the "now" medium.

"Live on tape" means all those tribal things we call living on a magnetic tap that permits detachment *a la* literacy. Adoption agencies now use videotape. The parents see the child on tape first. The "live" child can be considered without the immediacy of his needs present. Sounder judgments can be made. If the child is old enough, the process is also reversed. High-level cultural exchange is possible via videotape —between blacks and whites, for instance. What about a direct exchange by tape between a group of Montessori kids in the United States and a group of Suzuki kids in Japan. Live on tape, tribe to tribe, three-year-olds may make the best ambassadors.

The mythology and use of mirrors deserves serious study by the users of videotape. "Mirror, mirror, up against the wall . . ." the ugly duckling, Narcissus. McLuhan's chapter on the Narcissus myth in *Understanding Media* is extremely important if we are to get beyond the gadget-lover stage with

videotape. McLuhan's description of Narcissus applies perfectly to one three-year-old's experience with videotape. She felt compelled to imitate herself on the screen. If we were replaying her singing, she sang; walking down the stairs, she ran up and walked down again. McLuhan, in talking about Narcissus' reflection in the water, wrote: "This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image.... He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and become a closed system" (McLuhan 1964: 68). As we grow more willing to contemplate "what's happening," this need not be the case with videotape.

References:

See **Video Mind, Earth Mind**, Peter Lang Publishers, New York, NY, 1993,

by Paul Ryan

ISBN: 0-8204-1871-4