

Adult literacy and television: Some thoughts

by David Hargreaves, Consultant UK

On televised literacy campaigns and portrayals of literacy

The most obviously successful uses of television in relation to adult literacy have been in raising awareness, in creating “campaign atmospheres,” in eroding inhibition, and in making it possible for people to come forward for help. In the UK this was first exemplified in the middle and late 1970s by the national adult literacy campaign, involving many agencies, with broadcasting as its high profile outreach. The same pattern occurred in the 1980s in Project Literacy US (PLUS), and in campaigning programming in Canada. Around the developing world, this use of broadcasting has been seen in Cuba, India, Mexico and many other societies. Many such “campaigns,” including the one in the UK, have also used broadcasting to recruit volunteer tutors.

These applications of broadcasting have changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. They’ve made a real impact in increasing public understanding of the issues, and in provoking an increase in the budgetary resources going to literacy work. We must carry on using broadcasting to publicize learning opportunities and to try to erode the inhibitions and stigmas that stand in the way of them being pursued.

In the UK, the BBC continues to make its contribution through high profile “campaigns” (e.g. for family literacy and for numeracy) and independent commercial broadcasters making their’s, through the sensitive placing of characters and story lines in televised dramas, including long running series. The producers have carefully taken advice and the portrayal of characters has not usually been demeaning or patronising. In the last year in the UK, we have had thoughtful and sensitively written story lines in two of our most popular series on



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commercial television, “Coronation Street” and “Brookside”, with, in the latter case, excellent arrangements put in place for follow-up and related learning resources being made available. As more and more homes get on-line, the scope multiplies for us to offer web sites with expanded help, suggestions and content.

Responsibilities of broadcasters

However, it’s worth reflecting on the wider social dynamics of such “motivational” broadcasting and on the relative responsibilities of broadcasters and those in national agencies concerned with literacy work. National broadcasting is a potentially very powerful instrument, but it’s insensitive to local circumstance. Both in the UK and the US, national broadcasting has sometimes called forward demand in places ill-equipped to provide for it, leading to disappointment and perhaps damage. In the case of the UK’s first campaign our broadcasting went on remorselessly in peak time every week for two years. In some areas the parallel effort to use broadcasting to recruit volunteer tutors was effective, but often the volunteers arose in middle class areas rather than in the areas of deprivation where

they were most needed.

So you could say that it would be irresponsible for a national or local broadcaster to embark on projects or story lines in this area without consultation months or even years beforehand with the agencies providing face-to-face help. In the case of the BBC’s work this has always been done, and since the late 1970s there has been a national agency, now called the Basic Skills Agency, with whom that conversation could be had. (In our first efforts there was no such agency, and we had to travel the land talking individually to each of the 120 Local Education Authorities involved, forming our own view of the degree to which there was a consensus).

This seemed a responsible way to proceed. But there is a contrary view. The BBC is sometimes berated for keeping its contribution to literacy work in the 1980s and 1990s at a more calmly paced level than the heady drive of the 1970s. This judgement about level, however, has been made through co-operation with the Basic Skills Agency. The Agency steadily and patiently works to create resources and to help communities across the country build a solid, high quality,



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professional service in the wake of the sometimes desperate expansion and improvisation of the late 1970s, when the national literacy campaign had multiplied demand manifold. It collaborates both with the BBC and the new "University for Industry (Ufi)." The Agency is very appreciative of what broadcasting can usefully do, but it is also keenly aware of the downside of unplanned-for high impact national television..

...The need is still very large, and it can be argued that resources to meet it only get created or switched when the latent demand for adult basic education is transformed into embarrassingly visible present urgent reality. The argument is that the better resources available in the 1980s and the 1990s were won as a result of the BBC and its partners in the 1970s pushing ahead with broadcasting on a scale sometimes embarrassing and difficult for providers of face to face help. Suddenly large scale demand was visible, and was no longer a matter of meek and patient advocacy but of raw and crying need.

So one theme we might discuss is how far broadcasters should be encouraged to rock the boat in this area on their own initiative. Can they, should they, feel free to bring more than the tip of this particular iceberg into view, in a way which is difficult and bruising

for everyone involved, including would-be learners who may have frustrating waits for the help which the broadcast often makes seem so easily available? As educational agencies, working with broadcasters, should we tread cautiously in what we urge them to do? Or, should we take a deep breath and try to use television to mobilize massive learner demand, even knowing that in the short term we may not have the human and other resources to cope properly with it?

Television for adult literacy/basic skills instruction

Turning to a different theme, can broadcasters do more in the literacy field than motivate, disinhibit, and create awareness? Can broadcasters create resources from which adults at home can learn? Should they? Here we enter an area about which much less is known and in which I can only make assertions, unsubstantiated by relevant research findings. My major disappointment with broadcasters, including the BBC, is how little they have tried, how easily they have persuaded themselves that the job is un-doable, and even if doable, unsuitable for transmission at anything except a graveyard time.

Is television programming that

advances skill acquisition in basic skills possible? My assertion is that it is, if the educational goals are realistically selected. Such goals might for example be to introduce a concept - e.g. drafting, estimating, use of an index, laying out a letter. Even a single viewing, unsupported by print or other support, could be hoped to have some effect in introducing ideas like these. Clearly, developing phonic skills or skills of manipulating numbers is a different matter. Corrected individualised practice couldn't be delivered by the old-style linear analogue television we have known until now; so, using television for the real work of consolidated skill acquisition in such areas wasn't possible. However the coupling we can now achieve to on-line learning resources potentially increases efficacy enormously. The interactivity possible with digital television will change the whole nature of how we view — a whole seminar subject in itself!

It seems to me that we shouldn't be gloomy about television's ability to enhance skills simply because it may not be able to enhance all skills. Probably the most rewarding case study for us to follow in detail over the next few years is the GED preparation work of Kentucky Education Television. KET has for years developed and refined TV programmes and related materials of proven efficacy for the GED. The new KET/PBS/NCAL "Literacy Link" project offers on-line study resources as well as traditional media, and it will take us further into understanding how these elements can be used together than we have ever been before. Indeed it brings us to a strategic question we should debate: Is TV's role in the future essentially to be that of leading learners to the on-line and streamed video learning tools, or has it a real instructional value over and above that?

Roles of public/private broadcasters

It's certainly convenient for the public broadcasters to define TV's future educational role as being essentially signposting. In Europe they have become steadily more

reluctant to attempt on-screen teaching to adults. Public service broadcasters find themselves under ever-greater competitive pressure as more and more channels, cable, satellite, and digital technology are available in the home. To justify their claim on continued public financing, such channels need more and more to demonstrate that they are used for a reasonable amount of the time by a large proportion of the public. Achieving that level of use in a fragmenting marketplace pushes them steadily further and further into the mainstream, trimming away from the schedule the broadcasting for specialised, needy, smaller audiences, and placing it — if at all — as in the

us, at home and at work - it's part of our shared experience. We shouldn't imagine television's future contribution to adult literacy learning as just coming from the makers of educational programmes and on-line learning resources. I think we should continue to aspire to harness truly popular television to the service of advancing adult literacy.

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use reading, writing and number skills reliably and to good effect, even though we are living good and happy lives. Once we acknowledge the real scale of that phenomenon, then I think broadcasters can and should become creative in trying to design popular, useful programs related to it. Just as we have over the years created unpatronising and entertaining television vehicles for learning about cooking, gardening, fitness, health, DIY, and consumer vigilance, so we should be able to do this for basic skills.

In the United States, the Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) has for the last few years been working determinedly and resourcefully to create just such a series, now up and running, called "TV 411." It is ambitious and brave in using good writers, performers and producers from mainstream TV to make educational points through sequences styled in the main genres of popular TV. Watching "TV 411" you can see how many other shows in different television genres, from game shows to soap operas, could be created which entertainingly and unpatronisingly advance basic skill acquisition.

Playing devil's advocate

But, says the devil's advocate, could such shows ever get transmitted on the television channels watched by most of the hoped for audience? The experience of ALMA in rolling out "TV 411" will be critical evidence here. In its first phase "TV 411" was transmitted in four development areas (Pittsburgh, Seattle, El Paso and New York), where the local community really put its back into making the most of the impact broadcasting could create and prepared very thoroughly and caringly for it. However "TV 411" was mainly transmitted in these areas on PBS and community cable - perhaps not always the outlets ideal for reaching blue collar Americans. The show was developed outside the belly of a broadcaster, so it has to try to win broadcasters over to its virtues. It's now on offer to broadcasters all over the US and so far, about 90 public television stations have committed to carrying the series, meaning it is, in geographical terms at least,

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UK, in the night hours. And since audiences in the night hours, even for recording, can only be of modest size, we enter a vicious circle in which little is spent on publicizing, and little on creation. Fulfilling this part of the public service obligation through on-line resources rather than accessible broadcasts can make sense to the broadcaster.

On the future of television for adult literacy learning and for professional development

I think myself that to envisage television's future contribution to adult learning of basic skills as being only to motivate and to signpost would be very defeatist. We are all constantly learning from the television which flows through our daily lives without our sitting down at our computers. We learn from entertainment and drama as well as from journalism and factual programmes. Points are graphically and powerfully made by the techniques, creativity and skill of programme makers in all genres, including advertising. And we learn further because such television is talked about between

real interest to television executives in devising shows and developing schedules.

In the first phase of broadcasters' commitment to help people with poor literacy skills, we were fixated on those in most extreme need, whose plight was most dramatic, poignant, and in a way lent itself most naturally to being the subject of television programs. I believe we can offer some useful television learning resources to people with very limited skills. But such learners' confidence is often very fragile and it would be terrible if an offered television learning resource was not comprehensible to them and damaged their self-esteem further. So extreme care is needed.

But I see the real opportunity for television as being less in that area than in trying to help the 20% of us whose need is very real but less extreme. These are people whose situation is not exceptional - indeed it is in many ways normal. Our prosperous developed societies— and their broadcasters— have been very reluctant to accept the truth which is under our nose — that enormous numbers of us cannot

accessible to over 50% of the US population. This is a real achievement, and, at the Institute, we'll be able to hear more about the take up, response, and broadcasting time achieved so far.

In an ideal world such shows in the future would be developed from the start with and by broadcasters who are committed to reaching a mass audience. Imagine, say, Oprah Winfrey or Roseanne Barr at the centre of such a show. The frustrations of not understanding printed instructions, or assessing percentage discounts accurately, or decoding cunningly phrased descriptions of pricing or guarantees, isn't a minority experience – it's part of almost all our lives in some degree. Charismatic presenters and good writers can get basic points across about these matters, and the related basic skills. And as interactivity becomes a real part of digital television the scope for enjoyable and effective viewer involvement obviously increases.

But mainstream channels aren't the only way forward. In the digital world, there will be many channels specific to education – some of them already with us, like BBC Knowledge, and Canadian Learning Television. Probably most of these will design themselves around the concept of lifelong learning, and will seek to cater to interests across a wide educational spectrum.

Basics – common-sense stuff

Can there be niche channels pitched specifically at the “basics” level, related to coping with everyday life and the skills it demands of us? Why not, if the character and profile are carefully and sensitively shaped? Such channels would (in marketing-speak) be positioned as being consumer friendly offering “know-how”, getting value for money, getting to grips with baffling text and forms, getting the right help for your kids – basics. Practical common-sense stuff, which all of us sometimes need. We could envisage, for instance, a supermarket chain taking advertising on such a channel. Even public agencies might commission programming, explaining clearly and explicitly, at

a realistic pace, key aspects of social security, how to complete tax or health insurance forms etc. – areas where high costs arise through staff having to struggle with incomplete returns. I would envisage such a channel

craft boundaries and restrictive working practices which once made TV cumbersome and expensive. We are now at the point where anyone with a digital mini-cam can create videos to illustrate or convey a point or to offer

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presenting itself more as consumer guidance than education, with the basic skills points flowing out of the consumer or parenting issues.

As the broadcasting spectrum splinters, and almost an infinite number of digital niche channels become possible, why can't we invent one which develops its own programming at low cost and is advertiser-supported? This channel, while it steadily builds up its own inventory of original programming, would also carry programs like “TV 411,” “Crossroads Café,” and “GED” which already exist? Obviously, like all channels in the future, there would be related web-sites and gateways to more resources and more help, some of it individualised. As with all the emergent niche channels, the budget for publicity and marketing would be heavy.

So although the tide of broadcasting history is making it harder for the public service broadcasters to help literacy by creating and broadcasting learning resource programs on traditional generalist mainstream channels, the fragmentation is creating new opportunities for dedicated channels. The other good news is that the costs of TV production have fallen dramatically with the arrival of digital equipment, and the disappearance of all the old

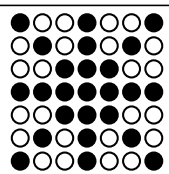
personal testimony, to share experience.

Finally, these shifts offer great opportunities to literacy teachers for professional sharing and for professional debate about techniques. In the US, the teleconferences organised by the NCAL and the PBS Adult Learning Service show what can be done and now form a regular part of the ongoing “Literacy Links” project. Georgia Tech's Lifelong Learning Network also broke new ground in this area. Perhaps we can look ahead to other dedicated digital television channels which for some hours each day broadcast resources which teachers can record, sharing professional experience, and sharing material created or garnered locally on video.

So I am an enthusiast for what TV can do. We are just at the beginning of the possibilities!

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