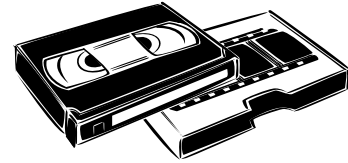
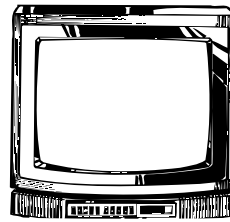


# Using television/video for adult learning



by Europe Singh, University for Industry, UK

## Introduction

Many claims are made for television. It can "cause" youngsters to become delinquents, rapists to rape; it can corrupt and deprave; it can turn "nice people" into racists and sexists. Without wanting to enter the minefields that represent these debates, there is probably some validity in all these propositions.

What appears to be taken for granted without much debate, however, is that television can educate. The advantages of television are of course great: it is ubiquitous – even the poorest household has one; it is engaging – in many environments the off-switch has ceased to function through lack of use (and have you ever been in a bar where there is a TV... your eye is inexorably drawn towards it. It may be the most puerile drivel, but you can't focus on the friend you haven't seen for months because you are straining to catch the exchange between JR and Sue Ellen that took place decades ago and is being shown again for those tired of life). TV can take us into worlds and human interactions that we would have to wait a lifetime to observe in the flesh. But can it educate? The BBC's mission, so familiar to many in the UK and I suspect elsewhere, is, with typical Reithian high-mindedness: "to educate, inform and entertain." Education is top of the list.

While television can do some things extremely well, it does others very poorly. We have to separate the usefulness from the hype. We also need to agree on what we understand by education and more specifically by learning.

For me, learning is an active process. We have to do something

with the inputs.

We have to find ways of connecting what we observe on that flickering screen with our existing meanings. Although the constructivist paradigm is not the only one for modelling learning, it is the one I am using here to understand this process. Television, however, as it is currently consumed by millions, is an essentially passive medium. If we want it to be put to the service of learning then we have to do things with it. For ten years I worked in BBC education and for the last two years I've been working in a new organisation

skills (and many other course areas) but how effective is this for the variety of adult learners and what are the unresolved problems?

## Television and video for ABE motivation

TV can act as a great motivator. We have seen the power of TV advertising, and equally TV can encourage adults to do something about their skills shortages. Devices such as role modelling, empathy, guilt and shame, but above all, wit can be used to propel

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called University for Industry (Ufi). In that time I have worked on many uses of the televisual form, ranging from mainstream broadcast television to video-rich multimedia.

I want to talk about a number of issues, which I will illustrate with samples of material.

### I want to focus on three areas:

- Using television and video  
How can the medium be used effectively for the education of adults and particularly those with poor basic skills?
- Future scenarios  
With the gradual demise of analogue television and the convergence of digital TV and global computer networks, what use will TV and video be in delivering learning?
- Problems  
The Ufi is posited on computer-based distance learning for basic

viewers to the telephone, SAE or postcard. Read and Write Together was a literacy campaign run on BBC TV in 1995. It used guilt to encourage parents to telephone a helpline and order a pack to help their kids with reading. The Basic Skills Agency printed 50 000 packs and was almost bankrupted when the response reached 1/3 of a million. The helpline could also provide – as did the pack – information on family literacy classes (which are still running successfully in many parts of the country).

The numeracy campaign, Count Me In, run in 1998 by the BBC, didn't have as big an impact: 180 000 callers rang for the booklet or CD-ROM but the "conversion rate" to numbers on courses was disappointing -- no more than a few thousand in traditional provision. It suffered from some confusion about the target audience and poor strategies to reach them. The CD-ROM proved a big success with colleges,

however, and is still being used with adults on basic numeracy courses. We currently have a new numeracy campaign running on BBC TV also called Count Me In, but this time focused on parents of young children once again. What we call "the low hanging fruit."

In general though it is much harder to attract learners to improve their numeracy than to improve their literacy. The hook

people with very poor skills responded.

### **As a didactic tool**

In 1995, I started running a late night service for Further Education (FE) and adult colleges in "dead" time in the middle of the night. It was a system pioneered by David Hargreaves as BBC Select. But this time it was free. We looked at how TV could be used to deliver learning in a more didactic way.

deliver? How keen are the owners of the delivery mechanisms to provide learning especially basic skills which may deliver little profit?.. And most importantly how soon will those who we want to reach have access to this technology?

### **Some answers from a UK perspective**

At the Ufi one interim solution to bandwidth and connectivity issues was to use hybrid forms employing local assets with thin connectivity.

### **Ufi**

So what is Ufi all about? Ufi is a new initiative to provide flexible learning for millions of adults. A key target is basic skills.

### **Problems**

Many problems remain in reaching learners and enticing them to improve their skills. Further issues arise in trying to deliver convenient open and distance learning particularly for those with poor basic skills. We have developed strategies for many of these but serious questions still remain in the areas of:

- Access • Interactivity • Quality and Robustness of networks • Learner support • Staff Development • Social aspects of learning • Recognition of achievement

### **Conclusion**

TV is a powerful medium that can be used to motivate; with the right wrap-around it can be an effective resource for learning. But it is not the case that TV on its own can educate – it can transmit information, it can engage and entertain and as such it can provide a powerful starting point for the learning process. The future is digital and video does not sit comfortably with the current state of these technologies, but over time I believe that video will become an essential ingredient of effective multimedia learning whether down a digital cable or transmitted over the air.

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is all important as witnessed by the enormously successful "Computers Don't Bite" campaign calling on adults to catch up and get some computer skills.

So television is a good motivator, but the target audience, the proposition and the development of the "hooks" have to be well researched. Radio and local radio should not be forgotten.

### **Learning by stealth**

Broadcast television is obsessed with viewing figures; so anything that may cause viewers to switch over or switch off is anathema. Education – unless it is learning about furry animals or natural disasters Discovery-Channel-style – is written out of the equation. The favoured approach of TV is what is called "education by stealth;" you sneak up on the viewer David Attenborough-like and inject them with a dose of education. I must admit that I have never seen an example of this that worked for basic skills. Channel 4 bravely integrated some plot lines into its soap, "Brookside," but this again was motivational rather than didactic, and a helpline was trailed after the programme. Although the impact was very limited – a few thousand learners nationally – for the first time for a broadcast-led campaign,

We drew on constructivist thinking and best practice of lecturers in designing FETV and used extracts from a wide variety of TV genres. We called this repurposing.

### **Repurposing**

Repurposing also seemed to me to fit with new digital platforms: Nuggets of TV wrapped around with activities.

In a similar way, we designed new programming with the possibility of migration in mind.

This then was the strategy: Yes to have the separate media - TV/print/website, but also to develop multimedia products using these assets. Given the state of technology, initially this would be on CD-ROM or DVD.

### **Future scenarios**

In the UK our government is obsessed with the internet. Everything and anything is possible through the internet, we are told. We are also told that convergence of internet and digital narrow-casting will be even better. These technologies offer opportunities for learning as well as increasing the profits of multimedia corporations with direct sales etc. But how soon will this convergence deliver the benefits to learning? What will it