

Notes from the Education Unit

**Is Education by Television
Just an Old Technology?**

Claudio de Moura Castro

January, 2000

Education Unit

Sustainable Development Department

Inter-American Development Bank

Is Education by Television Just an Old Technology?

Claudio de Moura Castro¹

Education by television? Turn on cable television and surf through the many education channels. What do we see? Grainy images. Black boards and stiff teachers, talking heads, no life, no punch, agonizingly slow rhythm. Definitely, not an uplifting sign and not the highest level of education technology.

Let us think of middle and high schools. The Kentucky Educational Television is a lively classroom linked by TV to other schools that lack teachers in that subject. But it is strictly conventional education using television. Korea also has a similar program for high school dropouts but it is not particularly innovative. It could be said that both are effective programs. But those looking for technological innovations will not find them inspiring.

However, it would be premature to write off television as an exciting media of instruction. There are two experiments that deserve a second look. When we turn our attention to the rich countries, none of them has enough high school dropouts to deserve much of an effort along these lines. The dropouts are few and the existing conventional schools can take care of them. This is certainly not the case of the poor countries. They have an ample supply of people who do not finish either intermediate or high school. In fact, in most of these countries, less than half finish secondary. Yet, they are neither able to afford conventional schools of quality nor to use technology creatively.

There are, however, two countries in the world which are sufficiently poor to have plenty of students out of regular schools and sufficiently rich to do something different about it. What distinguishes them from the others is that both have high quality commercial televisions. Both are major exporters of soap operas, probably the largest producers and exporters in the world. These countries are Mexico and Brazil. Not surprisingly, these countries have made a serious breakthrough in education television. To put it succinctly, they have applied costs and approaches of world-class commercial television to education. Being large countries, they can easily afford the fixed cost, since it is going to be used by several hundreds of thousands of students each year.

The Mexican Telesecundaria presently enrolls close to a million students and it is expected to continue to grow. In addition, neighboring countries are beginning to use it too. It is a strictly public program, produced by the Ministry of Education and mostly operated in rural schools. The teachers must have higher education diplomas but most are not career teachers. They receive a short training before being put in charge of classes. In order to

¹ The author is Chief Education Advisor at the Sustainable Development Department. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official position of the Inter-American Development Bank.

have a Telesecundaria school, the local community has to organize itself and request the creation of one, with the condition that they provide the physical space. Recent evaluation shows very positive results for the Telesecundaria, in terms of higher promotion rates, less dropouts and respectable results in student achievement tests. The costs are not too different from costs of regular education, after all, teachers are always the overwhelming cost. What we get in this formula is a package that delivers a quality of education that would not be possible with the teachers that can be recruited to teach in rural communities.

Eight o'clock. The parabolic antenna is beamed to a satellite. All seventh grade students are already seated in a rural Mexican classroom. The teacher gets up and turns on the television set. The class begins. The TV program focuses on a given subject, say, the study of the acceleration of bodies falling. The TV shows masons dropping bricks from a construction site and a stopwatch measuring the time it takes to reach the ground. The program is lively, emulating the style of commercial TV. There are workers and teachers in front of the cameras, as well as students and many different people in several environments. The conventional TV setups and backgrounds are often displayed. Video clips are used to illustrate the class. At 8:20 the class finishes and the TV is turned off (at the same time that it is turned on in the eighth grade classroom). The teacher tells the students to open their book to the corresponding page and start following its instructions. There is discussion of what was presented on TV, followed by drills and further discussion. It ends with a review. All this takes place following a rhythm and sequence paced by the book.

Notice that this is not distance education. It is face to face education in a classroom, with the presence of a teacher. It is not conventional education either, because the teacher has a different role. The TV totally replaces the lectures. It offers lectures of a quality level that is beyond the capabilities of all but the most talented and dedicated teachers.

Telecurso 2000, the Brazilian program, is a completely different story. It is produced by the Roberto Marinho Foundation, which is part of the Globo Network, the fourth largest TV network in the world. The Network is 100 percent private and so is the funding for the program.

At 6:15 in the morning, Globo broadcasts Telecurso 2000. Some households watch the program as children get dressed and have breakfast. But this is just an opportunity for users to tape the program for use at a later, more convenient time. In addition, education channels and cable TV re-beam the program during the day for workers seated in factory and office classrooms. But increasingly, firms are buying the tapes directly from the producer.

At some time during the day, more than 200,000 workers walk to a "distance classroom" to watch the tapes of Telecurso. A teacher's aid is around to hold discussions, troubleshoot and provide support to the students. The formula is not much different from the Mexican. There are also classes in labor unions, civic centers, penitentiaries, ships, buses and many

other environments. At the end of the year students must pass a public examination for the subjects they took (similar to a GED exam).

In recent years, public schools have discovered the program. Even though it is targeted to young adult dropouts, regular schools have taken an interest. The data are not reliable but it seems that more than 200,000 students in regular academic programs are using the Telecurso materials and techniques. Initial evaluation has shown the results to be very impressive, and in particular, much better than regular forms of education.

Telecurso has three strong and well-defined features. First, it is contextualized learning. Everything is presented in a context familiar to the student. The scenes take place in the street, in offices, factories, small enterprises, newspaper stands, etc. By contrast to the Mexican program, there are no classrooms, students, teachers and chalkboards in the screen. The idea is to present all school subjects, concepts and theories in an environment familiar and friendly to students. Contextualization is truly taken seriously. For instance, the English language class takes place in a travel agency that receives English-speaking tourists and also in the apartment of an American family living in São Paulo who have a Brazilian maid. The second feature is the emphasis on basic skills. The classes focus on skills that are important in life. Third, the production is expected to reach the quality level of Globo. There are no real teachers or students. All participants are professional actors, some of them known to the students for their roles in soap operas or commercials.

The rhythm is fast, very fast. And the production is slick. Images mimic the styles of commercial TV. The program shows many interviews in the street, to elicit responses to problems proposed in the class. The closest comparison would be to think of the sophistication of the best Discovery Channel or TLC programs targeted to regular school subjects. Education is marketed much like pizza or any other product, creating a demand that, much like the soap operas, stirs an interest in tuning into the next installment.

Essentially, the producers have come up with a program that is eminently fun, funny, fast and entertaining. At the same time, it is dead serious education. After all, it has to follow the regular curricula of junior high and high schools. Phone polls have shown the audience of the program to be predominantly people who watch “because they like educational programs” and not those who are preparing to take the examination. The latter do not watch the program on TV but on video at the scheduled classes at work. There are several million people watching the program just because they like it. In fact, the author has recently met a highly respected Brazilian ambassador, a former rector of the premier Brazilian university and a well-known journalist who watch the program regularly.

If a rector, a journalist and an ambassador watch what is supposed to be a high school class, something is right, something is quite remarkable. The television media allows a good team to produce a class that is vastly superior to any live class in the world. No real teacher can match resources of the TV or approach the refinement, structure, variety of images and humor that is conveyed in such a class. The computer and Internet media may

be interactive but they remain poor and primitive media compared to the shine and punch of high quality television.

Television is not a dead or an obsolete media for education. It is alive and doing a lot of good. But elsewhere.