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Hands On!

Most young people feel at home working with media equipment and materials. And it's not surprising really — today's children were born into the midst of the technological age. T.V. receivers, complex kitchen apparatus, power tools, instamatic cameras and phonographs are all part of the average suburban home. Today many home environments include also tape recorders, movie cameras, stereo systems, 35mm cameras and slide projectors. Thus, it is not unusual that school-aged children from kindergarten up are sophisticated users of the products of communication technology. They enjoy taking pictures, making movies, running projectors or recording their voices and they do so with confidence and competence. What is surprising is that educators have been so slow to recognize and capitalize on this natural interest.

Granted, since World War II, when using a wide variety of media was proved to be of great value in training men and women with dissimilar educational backgrounds, educators have been advocating the use of technological resources in the school. But the emphasis has always been on teacher use rather than student use of the equipment and materials. Thus was coined the old term "audio-visual aids" — implying that motion pictures, radio programs, picture series, etc. were merely a crutch for the teacher, an aid in getting information across to her students.

Even into the sixties when some (supposedly more fortunate) schools were making extensive use of T.V., the student remained a passive receiver of information. He sat back and viewed a duplicate of the traditional teacher-to-large-group lesson — with even less opportunity for interaction and involvement in the teaching-learning process.

But during the sixties, educational and technological changes worked together to provide a learning situation more appropriate to the learning needs of the young. Research about learners and how learning takes place indicated a need to: 1) regard the learner as a unique individual requiring an individualized learning program; 2) actively involve the student in the learning process; 3) stress intellectual skills rather than content; 4) stimulate inquiry and 5) simulate real experience. In order to meet these needs, a wide range of materials — both print and non-print — must be made available to students for use individually or in small groups. Previously, much of the media equipment purchased for schools was large and complicated. It hardly lent itself to individual use, particularly by small children, but with new technological advances most of these obstacles have been overcome. Cassette tape recorders, filmstrip projectors, 8mm film, loop projectors, etc. are now small and light enough to be handled like books and simple enough to be operated by primary grade children. Many media materials are packaged in plastic cartridges and thus can survive much student handling.

Probably the change that has had the most influence in the potential use of media in the schools, however, is the great reduction in cost associated with the development of smaller, less complex versions of most media. In many cases these items are not only less expensive but are of greater value in the learning process than their costlier, larger brothers. But in order to make full use of the potential of the newer media equipment and materials, it is essential that students be provided with the opportunity to use this technology on their own. Students should be able to use cassette tapes, filmstrips, records and slides for gaining information in the same way that they presently use books.

Learning research indicates that some children learn better from some materials than others and that some ideas are better conveyed by one medium than by another. Thus, it is important that students be provided with a variety of materials from which to select that which best suits them for their particular purpose. Non-print materials can be catalogued and stored on library shelves in the same way as books. Students should be able to check out the necessary viewing or listening equipment in the same way that they check out books from the library. A student may use the materials selected for individual research within the library,

take them to his classroom for use with other students, or take them home for the weekend to be viewed and discussed with parents and friends.

If educators truly desire to provide for individual differences, then non-print materials must be available for the student not just for independent learning but also for independent creative expression. While many schools today have a Learning Resource Center stocked with a variety of materials for student research, very few allow the student to communicate what he has learned in any form other than print. Thus, while a student may find that a filmstrip, his next door neighbor, and several pictures are his best source of information on a certain topic, he will usually be required to submit a written report. Thus, at the climactic point in the teaching-learning process, when creative expression is about to take place, individual differences are no longer acknowledged and all students are expected to communicate their ideas using the same medium — the written word.

For some of the same reasons that books still remain the major source of information today, writing is likely to remain the primary means of expression for many years to come. However, reading books and writing reports (both of which require highly developed skills on the part of the student) should not be the only means for communicating in the schools. An audio tape, a set of transparencies or photographs, or a three-dimensional model can be just as valuable as (and often more appropriate than) a written essay in furnishing evidence that a student's idea has been fully developed.

The enthusiasm shown when a student can use various media to express himself, to record his environment, to document others around him, to present information to other students makes it obvious that, if involvement leads to learning, then learning is indeed taking place. Anyone who has viewed an elementary science class film on pollution or heard a social studies tape-recorded news report featuring man-on-the-street interviews or seen a Grade 5 student's Instamatic slides illustrating types of urban architecture cannot fail to be fully impressed with the competence and enthusiasm young people bring to this "hands-on" approach to media in the schools.