



by Jim O'Hearn

Birchland Park Television Studio

FOR FIFTEEN YEARS, THE STUDENTS OF BIRCHLAND PARK MIDDLE SCHOOL LOBBIED A SUCCESSION OF PRINCIPALS AND SUPERINTENDENTS FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO BEGIN A TELEVISION STUDIO AS PART OF THE SCHOOL PROGRAM. FINALLY, IN 1995, THE SUPERINTENDENT PUSHED THE "PLAY" BUTTON AND PROMISED FUNDING. WE RAISED EVEN MORE MONEY THROUGH SMALL GRANTS AND DONATIONS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS. THESE CONSTITUENCIES INCLUDED GROUPS LIKE THE PTO, CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, THE LIONS CLUB AND THE LOCAL CULTURAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL. RAISING THAT MUCH MONEY IS NOT A SIMPLE TASK, BUT THE PROGRAM'S UNIQUENESS AND CREATIVITY HELPED SELL IT.

The studio was located in the middle school and the school system provided space in the former Home Economics room. Home Economics had been phased out some years previously, along with the wood and metal shop courses. The stoves, cabinets and sinks were removed, the room carpeted and a small, one-step, stage area installed. During the fall of 1995 and spring of 1996 we looked at how to get the best possible equipment for the money we had. It was clear that we weren't going to recreate CNN, but we could install an excellent, basic studio.

In the first years, students were assigned to special subjects at the discretion of the office. One year, the entire school population of over 650 youngsters was assigned to a marking period apiece in the TV Studio course. We couldn't find any texts or curriculum for middle school Television Production. We can attest that making it yourself from scratch is a labor-intensive operation. We learned as we succeeded or failed. During the third year of TV Studio, our school district decided to construct a new middle school. Because we had established the value of the TV course the plans included not merely a room for the TV course, but a studio suite of eight rooms! We have now completed our first full year in our new studio suite. We have a classroom for project construction. We have a control room, an announcer's booth, a main studio about 25 feet by 35 feet, two edit rooms, a storage area, and an office for the TV Studio director.

Not only did we get more room—we got more equipment. Now, most of our equipment is digital, but we can still both play back and record in analog. The maintenance and repair issues are yet to be resolved. The Studio Director can work on some equipment, but the installation tech people have suggested that figuring at least a day in the studio at the end of the year by a qualified technician is prudent. A repair budget is a must. In a school setting, things get broken—and as the equipment ages, repairs will be a larger issue.

Presently, TV Production courses are offered only to seventh and eighth graders. Due to numbers and time limitations, each student is only in the studio for ten weeks—fifty meetings. In that ten-week period, we hope to give students a sense of the interdependency. Television is a team effort. There are no unimportant jobs. Each person's work affects everyone else's. We decided that in order to understand the steps necessary to bring a project from concept to conclusion, they should be able to operate the equipment at a competent level.



The booth announcer, here Allyson Szoka, sits in a separate room and watches the program on a monitor.



Kristina Pappas and Matt Atwater position and focus cameras during a live production.



During a typical studio presentation, Gina Rosati and Jill Garreffie operate the cameras as the teleprompter scrolls the script for talent.

At the beginning of the course they receive instruction in basic equipment operation. Students then choose partners and construct a project. In the seventh grade, this project generally consists of selecting video composed of still photos and video tape shot outside of school on their own. They may edit the tape in the studio. They then construct a creative writing narrative around that video and transpose it into storyboard form. To begin the project, the class meets as a group and forms into production teams. Each project has its own crew of about 12 people. They spend two weeks in rehearsal, with each project rehearsed as often in sequence as there is time available. The final week of the marking period, all projects are recorded and graded, and then everyone concludes the marking period by watching their final productions on monitors in the classrooms. There is a rubric posted in the classroom for standards that must be achieved by each aspect of a final production, and point values are assigned to different levels of performance.

Eighth grade students are allowed to create their own projects. The most popular tend to be music videos, newscasts, and travelogues. There is a list of approximately fifty different projects that students may use as a basis for ideas. These suggestions include everything from biographical features, read-aloud programs for elementary youngsters, teacher profiles, and instructional videos, to create-a-country projects, interdisciplinary projects, and even silent movies with piano background and sub-titles.

At the end of each marking period, they are given an opportunity to fill out two-page course evaluation with both objective and subjective questions. They render opinions on everything from the difficulty of creating visuals in the proper aspect ratio to the eccentricities of the TV Studio Director. The vast majority of the students have strong positive feelings. They like the freedom to create, the interaction with their peers, the hands-on opportunity to use technology, and the chance to evaluate the finished product. The downside, most will say, is the time

limitation. Almost everyone will make some reference to the fact that there is never enough time to do the things he or she wants to do. But when asked to rate the course on a scale of one to ten, the average score over the past four years has been an eight-plus. And for middle school students, that's a ringing endorsement.

A major by-product of the TV Studio is the student studio staff. Students become part of the staff only by invitation from the TV Studio Director. That invitation is generally based on work done in the TV Production class. Students who show creativity and a strong work ethic are offered the opportunity to become a part of the student staff, which serves three major functions. First, they essentially are TV interns. They assist students in TV production classes and teachers before school, during the lunch block, and after school. This assistance may take the form of working with students on projects or equipment. They may assist teachers in taping programs or classroom projects or they may shoot videos for clubs.



In the control room, Matt Atwater installs the character generator that brings words up onto the program monitor at desired moments of the production.



Jill Garreffie stands in front of the chroma screen, which can be transformed by the video board into any still or film background by the video switcher.



In the control room, Matt Atwater and Mary Dion (l-r) operate the character generator and videoswitcher during a production.



Matt Atwater and Mary Dion work together on the character generator and video switcher to create the video, transitions and word screens necessary to complement each other in a production.



Danielle Stone demonstrates how video can be assembled in any order using the non-linear editor, one of the most functional post-production pieces of equipment.



TV Studio Director, Jim O'Hearn often meets with students in regard to program concepts, equipment sign-outs, studio scheduling issues, and project problems.

Second, the studio staff produces programs for the school and/or its many organizations. For example, we now broadcast morning announcements on TV every day. The principal serves as the announcer once a week and the rest of the week is divided between students and staff. The student studio staff writes the copy, clipboards it to the teleprompter, operates all the equipment, and broadcasts it to the school where each classroom can watch on a monitor. Earlier in the year, the Diversity Club sponsored a visit by a bus that traveled the country, bringing with it artifacts from every community it had visited. The TV Studio staff created a ten-minute video that gave a face to the school and the community, so that towns and cities around America could understand who we were and what our lives were like.

The third function of the student staff is to create and execute video demonstrations outside the school district. These shows, which are all presented live and in real time, demonstrate the value of a TV Studio in the school environ-

ment, how students can create shows and produce them, and how television can add vitality to school life and create positive public relations. Our staff has put on newscasts, music videos, and science experiments for school administrators and teachers in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The youngsters love the opportunity to strut their stuff, and audiences are amazed at the quality of the work.

Our broadcast of morning announcements each day has made the TV Studio much more visible to everyone in the building. Very soon, we plan to take over the educational access channel on the local cable and become cable providers. We hope to be able to provide a couple of hours each morning and evening of programs taped in the TV studio. We will also provide a bulletin board of school announcements and activities from all the district's schools. Our long-range goal is to train a larger student studio staff and work out logistics so that these students can be taken with equipment to venues all over the school system. They would do their shoots, return to the studio to edit,

and put the programs together in increments of quarter-hours. These would then be broadcast on cable. Eventually, we hope to be able to extend the program into the high school, which presently houses the local community access studio. Students would then be able to become the production arm of that facility, which would focus on municipal and civic events. In that way, any town resident who wished to know what was going on in the schools or town would be able to tune in to one of the two local cable channels and get that information – all provided by local students.

Our plans for the future also include two business partnerships. We have talked to the local Chamber of Commerce, and they are interested in working with us to create an alliance between the television studio and local businesses. Some of them have already discussed the possibility of allowing students to shoot on location at their businesses and create features and commercials. Others are interested in the possibility of instructional videos for their employees. We also will create



Jessica Hawkins works on a script in preparation for a broadcast. The computer is also used for graphic preparation and Power Point presentations that are transferred to live presentation.



Kristina Pappas and Jennifer Johnson transfer the audio and video rough concepts to storyboards that will be used in the actual directing and rehearsals for the program.



The Student Studio Staff holds a production meeting at which decisions are made on crew assignments, as well as specific audio and video techniques that will be utilized.



The view of the studio through the eyes of the talent can be intimidating, as the camera people, teleprompter, and monitors are all in the field of vision.



A typical studio production includes three camerapersons, here with science teacher Sam Lucci, in the main studio. Additional personnel could include a floor director and lighting supervisor.



The videoswitcher, Mary Dion, is bringing the proper video source up onto the screen and creating transitions to get from one piece of video to another.

a partnership with one or another of the local commercial television stations. One of them has already evidenced a willingness to do their noontime newscast from our studios once or twice a school year. They would also be willing to run public service announcements developed by our students.

Within the curriculum, students and teachers are becoming increasingly inclined to recognize TV as a medium through which acquired knowledge can be proven. Finished programs can become a substitute for a test. It can engage otherwise reluctant students. Television is a vehicle for synthesizing information from two or more subject areas into a

cohesive whole. It is a way of celebrating the achievements of our students and staff and displaying it to the community. It encourages teachers to work together to create interdisciplinary projects.

Television is a bottom line business that in many ways reflects real life experiences. You start with a concept. You have to bring that concept from idea to finished product – abstract to concrete. You have to work co-operatively with others. You have to accept responsibility for deadlines. You're judged by the final product you create. These are all excellent life lessons and all teachable through television productions. ●

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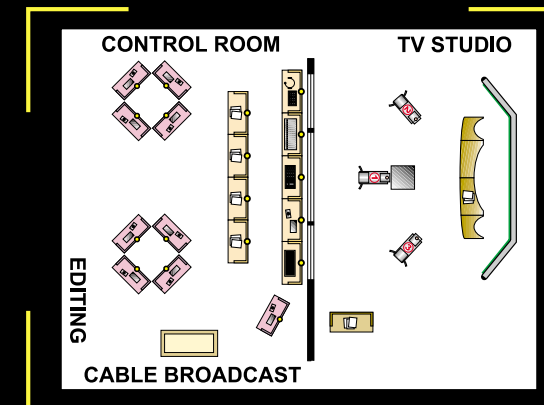
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