

Schools Make 8mm Sound Motion Pictures

By LOUIS FORSDALE

A handful of schools and colleges are beginning to make 8mm sound motion pictures for local use. Although it is too early to speak of trends, some sense of direction about the local production possibilities in schools can be gotten by looking at the practices of these pioneers.

ALTHOUGH overshadowed by the prospects that 8mm sound film will make significant contributions to education by means of release prints, it is also probable that 8mm sound will stimulate local production of films in schools. Teachers and students have been making motion pictures occasionally here and there for years, but now the practice should become widespread in local schools.

What 8mm sound does now is to make practical for the many what was once possible only for the few. Because of the comparatively low cost of 8mm equipment and film and the ease of operating many of the new 8mm cameras, for the first time the opportunity to make sound films is realistic for teachers and students in schools where film making was unheard of yesterday.

An analogy is readily available from the audio-recording field. Disc recording apparatus had been available to schools for a long time, but it took the portable tape recorder — with its relative ease of handling, its quality, and its moderate cost — to make recording a common educational tool. And once available, the tape recorder almost literally created its own uses in education. It helped revolutionize language teaching, for instance, a fact which few could predict. 8mm sound is likely to create its unforeseen uses, too.

For over two years my associates and I at Teachers College have experimented in making 8mm sound films locally, using both synchronous sound and post-stripping techniques. We have also tried to learn what other schools and colleges were doing. Here is a sampling of local production possibilities which we suspect will be stimulated by 8mm sound systems.

Performance Films

Seeing and hearing oneself in action is a powerful learning tool. Some psychologists feel that deep insights leading to powerful motivation for behavior change can result from this process,

Presented on October 3, 1961, at the Society's Convention at Lake Placid, N.Y., by Louis Forsdale, (Professor of English and Principal Investigator, Project in Educational Communication), Teachers College, Columbia University, New York 27.

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particularly if a friendly "interpreter" can view the film of a student with him, and comment upon it. This is precisely the way 16mm film is used in athletics in high schools and colleges.

Now 8mm, in both silent and sound versions, offers the possibility of expanding studies of performance in such areas as these:

- (1) student teachers in action before their classes,
- (2) students giving speeches in high school or college classes,
- (3) student actors in dramatic performances,
- (4) "before" and "after" films of posture in physical education classes,
- (5) students performing intricate manual skills such as performing surgery on an animal, and
- (6) student psychologists interviewing patients.

One matter which should be called to the attention of engineers here is the fact that we could make very good use of 8mm cameras, both silent and single-system sound, which have very much greater film capacity than those presently available. Studies of performance will be greatly enhanced by uninterrupted films of say, ten, fifteen or twenty minutes in length. I am confident that such cameras would in time find a small but stable market adequate to support the research and design effort.

Unique Local Teaching Films

Educational films which are made for national distribution cannot be rooted in the local experience of a given school or community. Yet it is well known in education that the child benefits by "beginning where he is." Imagine, then, science films made locally, drawing, say, upon the geology of the immediate countryside: the geology which the child can see and touch himself — all of this leading to generalizations about earth science. (Just such a use of locally produced 8mm sound film is planned in the Tarrytown, N.Y., Public Schools next year.) Or, imagine inexpensive 8mm films drawing upon local architecture, leading to a more generalized analysis of architectural forms. Or imagine a social studies film for elementary schools based on such institutions

as the local police and fire departments and the library.

Such films need not be limited to elementary and secondary schools levels, of course. Dr. Edmund B. Middleton of the School of Medicine, University of Maryland, has pointed out to me that he has been using 8mm sound for the "preparation of the medical student for his entrance to hospital areas such as delivery and operation rooms." He continues: "A good film [with narration] describing, for example, an operative procedure would be excellent preparation for actual participation as an assistant with a surgical team. Numerous procedures involving special equipment are very effectively taught [this way]."

Dr. Middleton adds another note which makes a point of central interest in this question of local production by teachers and students who are essentially film amateurs: "As a person who had never touched a movie camera or a projector before and suddenly found himself in charge of an 8mm Bolex and a Kodak 8 projector, I was amazed with the simplicity and ease with which this equipment can be understood and used effectively." He could have mentioned any one of many cameras or projectors, of course, and the statement would be equally true.

Other local educational films might be based on field trips into the community, a technique which is used widely in the elementary grades. Superintendent Matthew Gaffney of Tarrytown, N.Y., plans next year to place cameras in the hands of interested teachers to make visual notes of these field trips. The resulting footage — inelegant as it probably will be — will nevertheless give children an opportunity to participate enthusiastically in analysis of the experience as they ponder content of the soundtrack. Mr. Gaffney feels that this activity will offer a high order of experience for reading preparation.

To digress from school uses of 8mm film, it is interesting to learn that industry is making use of 8mm sound film when its men take trips into the field. D. G. Treichler of the Socony Mobil Oil Company has said that they plan to encourage people making field trips to shoot 8mm movies of things of importance on their trips, so that an audio-visual picture can be presented to management instead of the long written report.

And, of course, there are many other opportunities for making instructional

films locally: of science experiments, of procedures for operating equipment in the school's shops, of techniques for using the library, etc. Many of these films might be of a review nature, permitting students who have not understood the first time to study materials repeatedly. Loop projection could be useful here. And how useful simpler projectors — cartridge loading types, for instance — would be! The Technicolor projector is an enormous breakthrough which we in education should study with vigor and which engineers who have an eye to the future should consider with utmost respect.

Public Relations

Because schools in a democratic society dare not operate outside the context of the local community, public relations work is vital in American education. It is not merely a matter of publicity, but rather of seeking understanding, as is the best of public relations in any field. Locally produced films offer much here; a film of a class or an extra-curricular activity or of student leaders or teachers would be of great interest to parents, PTA groups, local service clubs, and visitors to the school.

Film as Art

I am sure this is partly personal bias, but I must confess that to me the most exciting use of 8mm sound film in education is in the making of films as an artistic experience. These would not be films *about* educational matters — not films about field trips or science or speech or English, necessarily — but films created out of the student's own imagination toward the important goal of encouraging expressiveness and creativity. And surely cultivation of creativity is one of the central goals of a full education. The child who knows the fact but

not the feeling is half a child and will grow into half a man who neither serves himself nor society well.

Characteristically, our artistic experiences in school are centered in English classes and the too infrequent art, music and dramatic classes which we offer in American public schools. The modes of expression which are explored are words, painted picture, music, gesture. But very, very few children get an opportunity to manipulate any of the important media of our day which are dependent upon machines — television, still photography or motion pictures. With these media the child is expected to be a consumer, not a creator. The result is that a child becomes an adult who is only partly literate in some of the most important media of our time.

Two summers ago my colleagues and I grasped an all too brief opportunity to work with a select class of seventh graders in the production of films. We resolved to let them make the final decisions about topic and treatment, and to handle all equipment personally. After three introductory sessions in which we saw films and discussed the nature of the medium, in which we examined the cameras and projector, and in which we did some supervised shooting of long shots, close-ups and pan shots, we crossed our fingers, gave four simple automatic exposure cameras and a limited amount of color film to the groups and said, in effect, "make some films."

The children elected to shoot films about subjects familiar to them — the Cloisters in New York City, Central Park, a trip to Stamford, Conn., or Staten Island. They brought back footage which lent itself to editing into what, for a seventh grader, might modestly be called a motion picture. The raw materials were at least as good as most

of their parents would take, given the same subjects — although *that* is faint praise. With continuing systematic experience and criticism, we feel that we would have been able to help them grow into sensitive, understanding, critical film viewers as well as producers. They might even become discriminating television viewers in the process.

There are many other local production possibilities with 8mm sound film, such as its uses in research work at all levels, including graduate education, or its use in recording singular events such as important guest speakers, homecoming day programs, and the like.

Conclusion

Let me leave you with this thought. Education is essentially a specialized form of communication. We send our children to school so that they may mature in association with people and materials toward certain goals. In this process words have been and will continue to be of central importance. But after more than a quarter of a century of experience in the audiovisual field in education, we are only beginning to realize with deep conviction that a major thrust of our time must be to adapt our new communication technology — a technology which has changed much in our society — to the needs of education. In this engineers play a critical role, for until we are given simple, durable, inexpensive equipment our dreams are merely dreams. 8mm sound equipment is a case in point. Here engineers have opened up new uses for film in education, the most important activity in the United States today. But our equipment today is surely only a step along the way to the future. We in education look forward eagerly to new developments in 8mm equipment.