

# A Pattern for University Film Production

By ROBERT A. WEISGERBER

**After discussion of a rationale for film-making by educators, examples are drawn from the three-pronged approach operating at Indiana University. An examination of characteristics inherent in (1) student films, (2) departmental service films and (3) educational films for general public use is given. Production procedures common to the three categories are considered.**

**T**HREE ASSUMPTIONS are made as the basis for approaching educational film production. These are offered *not* because they are the *only* reasons for educational film production, but rather because they seem to be sufficiently *valid* reasons, stemming from past decades of research reported by communications theorists.

The first assumption is that educators find in film-making an opportunity to control message structure very critically along two dimensions—spatial and temporal. To be more precise, as he creates film the educator may manipulate the physical relationship of visual cues in any given frame space. He does this by selection and arrangement of these cues so that they accurately carry his intended meaning. He also has the opportunity for temporal or sequential control over these cues, and so he can even manipulate the time-line of presentation to achieve desired student reactions.

A second assumption is that film-making as a *process* is educational in itself, regardless of what content is being treated. And so the making of films becomes a tutorial technique of tremendous potential for developing new communicators, audio-visual people, and so on. Everyone who has been involved in the making of a film will attest that they learned a lot from it. As the late Charles Kettering said, when a Vice President of General Motors, "Learn to use your hands as well as your head. I am not belittling education, but the person educated entirely through books is only half educated. There is a kind of practical knowledge and good sense which can flow into the brain only through the use of the hands."

A third assumption is perhaps the most obvious of all. An educator who makes film multiplies his teaching many times over, as many times as the number of prints and the number of times they are shown. Any educator who believes in his message wants the maximum au-

dience to hear it. Film not only provides the transmission medium, but also offers the advantage of providing great efficiencies in the learning process for those in the field: the teacher-user and student-user. The teacher-user saves an infinite amount of time collecting data, filtering facts, obtaining visual examples from hither and yon, codifying the information into a tightly knit instructional plan, and so on. The student-user of today may efficiently learn from film in the large auditorium situation, in the small group situation in class or at home, or, for that matter, may even learn from film all by himself with a conventional projector or hopefully with an 8mm repeater cartridge-load projector or an appropriate 16mm teaching machine.

It should be apparent from these three assumptions that raw film in the hands of the educator film-maker is likely to challenge him to a control over message structure that is as scientific in character as the present state of human learning research permits.

The writer has been asked on a number of occasions: "But how can you university and college people afford to get involved in the expense and effort of film making?" — and: "How does your product differ from that made by other film-makers around the country?" An answer can be found in three situations which often result in educators becoming film-makers. Though these examples are based on the operation at Indiana University, there are equally valid arguments to substantiate the need for educational film-making by virtually all institutions of higher learning. There are already many institutions with active staffs; the University Film Producers Association lists over 80 institutions involved in production in at least some degree. There is a great deal of variety in emphasis and approach to film production. One should not expect, then, to find the Indiana University pattern to be typical of the group, though in one or more of its aspects it surely is representative.

## Types of Productions

The first situation that calls for production is the use of film as a medium

of experimentation in training communicators. It is simply called *Student Production* or SP. At Indiana University it has been possible for 16 years to get a doctor's degree in audio-visual communications, with an emphasis in the production area. Obviously it doesn't require a doctor's degree to be a cameraman or even to make a film; but the program is intended to provide each student with a balance between communication theory and its practical application in one or more of the media.

The films made by these students are sometimes one-man shows, and sometimes the result of team efforts, with a rotating position of directorial responsibility. The choice of topics and treatment is left to the students' preferences although they do have counsel from a faculty member who acts as a check on the authenticity and adequacy of the message. And, of course, the students also receive some technical guidance from the faculty member who instructs the course.

Such films serve a dual purpose. They not only teach their makers, they also teach each succeeding production class. The budgets are rock bottom; an outlay of approximately \$500 is not unusual, including laboratory costs through first answer print. What is saved in dollar investment, though, is almost invariably balanced by extra long hours in production on the part of the student.

The second situation arises from requests from the institution itself or from some affiliated or nonprofit organization. "Campus production" (CP) or "local service production" are terms often used for this category. Requests for CP shows originate from departments that see a need for a film, perhaps because the need is not one that is felt by others outside of the immediate geographic area, or perhaps the topic is for a use other than in the curriculum and is not available commercially. In this kind of client relationship the Audio-Visual Center offers its technical services and its manpower in all stages of production, but in the final analysis the client "calls the shots." Topics range from the annual public relations films on the University's marching band to special research projects for limited audiences.

In this campus service category, production costs are borne in whole or in part by the client. A representative example of costs might be \$3,100 for a 20-min show in black-and-white, utilizing multi-camera sync sound shooting on location with three camera teams.

Presented on October 25, 1962, at the Society's Convention at Chicago, by Robert A. Weisgerber, formerly at Indiana University, Bloomington, Ind.; and now at Audio-Visual Center, San Francisco State College, 1600 Holloway Ave., San Francisco 27, Calif.  
(This paper was received on December 31, 1962.)

Films of the CP category often require accelerated production schedules and frequently provide a further training experience for young film makers assuming directorial responsibilities. Film output in this service category is averaging twenty-five reels per year but much of this is silent footage.

A third obligation held by educators is that of public service. This not only involves preparation of materials for use by people on the campus, but also films for educators and students not directly connected with the university. At Indiana this sort of production is dubbed "Educational Production" (EP). In this public service roll the institution endeavors to use the talents of its own faculty and other leading educators to raise the quality of instruction in the public schools. In addition, this kind of production benefits the university by enabling the professional staff to maintain their production talents at the same time they are teaching graduate courses. The backgrounds and specialties of the production supervisors on the staff largely determine the choice of topics and, therefore, the areas of greatest contribution to the public schools. Currently at Indiana's Audio-Visual Center there are specialists in physical and biological science, health and medicine, history, and geography. Output of this sort of film has lately averaged ten reels per year.

Nearly all EP productions are financed out of a "revolving fund." This means that each investment in new films is contingent upon receipts from sales of earlier films. Fortunately, some films outsell their production costs, enabling the institution to undertake the production of certain sorely needed but less widely circulated films. In calculating production costs the \$1,000-a-minute rule of thumb seems to describe the norm for this category of film-making. These EPs are intended to be professional quality products and commensurate time

and energies are devoted to their creation.

### The Production Process

The *process* of production is similar, if not identical, in the three categories of film-making described: student production, campus service production, and educational production. Furthermore, it is typical that the educator-film-maker (called the production supervisor) is the responsible party throughout *all* phases of production from idea to release print.

All of the films are initiated by means of a sheet of *specifications* telling primary and secondary purposes, primary and secondary audiences and pertinent technical details concerning, length, color, sound, etc.

After the specifications are approved, the production supervisor embarks on research for any and all relevant information which can be organized into a *content outline*. In the outline he indicates key generalizations and specific facts to support them. It is at this point that he really comes to grips with what aspects of the problem can or cannot be included.

The production supervisor then translates these data into *treatments*. Educator-film-makers might describe this as designing a strategically effective pattern in order to get the message across. By manipulating the treatment variable he describes in general form a variety of approaches to the topic.

By this time the production supervisor has formed a group of three or more educational consultants, usually balanced with one content expert, one curriculum expert and one audience expert. He presents his content data and treatment strategies to them and, with their feedback, he narrows down the alternatives to one revised approach.

The next step involves *storyboarding* and rough *scripting*. Frequently these are combined into a single step in the production process. Here the *generalized plan* of the treatment is translated into a

*specific plan* for the spatial and temporal control over *all* cues in the sound and picture. This is an extremely critical step and it is therefore customary to transport the consultants from wherever necessary to meet and analyze these two code elements, script and storyboard, for several days. Though the sessions always produce some sparks, they also result in a good workable shooting script.

The *shooting phase* introduces much variety in the size and complexity of crews. However, they are always composed of other production supervisors and/or students in the graduate program at Indiana University. Other institutions often vary from this kind of crew organization.

Similarly, the *editing* is most often done by the production supervisor himself or by his graduate assistant. Again, in editing, at the rough cut stage prior to sounding, educational consultants are called together for a weekend look at the visual and verbal components of the message.

Finally, the *evaluation* stage is that part of the process which is currently under closest scrutiny. Some supervisors rely on the judgment of authorities brought in for approval sessions, while others field-test their films with the intended audience. This last point is of such importance that the U.S. Office of Education has awarded a sizable grant to one member of the department to study the effect on message success (or learning) that is introduced when films are altered as a result of student feedback.

Perhaps this last point reminds us all that film production by educators provides unique opportunities for them to combine the sensitivities about environment possessed by the artist, the applied scientific procedures of the engineer, and the basic theories of human behavior that grow out of the communications discipline. It is a challenging field to be in.