
Kids, Imagination, and Audio In The Classroom

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Introduction

When, in the 1950's, television replaced radio as the principle medium of home entertainment, the listener no longer had to use his or her imagination. Favorite characters and their actions became visually detailed on the TV screen. Society has since increasingly relied on images created by others to give form and definition to the world in which all live.

Passive viewing has become the routine of both the family at home, and the student in the classroom. Reading and listening has been replaced by sitting and viewing. This is not to criticize television, for it is an invaluable resource for learning. However, the ability of children and adults to use their imaginative capabilities has greatly diminished over the past forty years. Being able to use one's imagination is critical in problem solving, and the generation of new ideas.

Teachers understand the value of literature for facilitating the development of a child's imagination. The use of words to stimulate one's own personal adventures with Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn has long been recognized. Less appreciated by educators has been the use of audio as a medium for enriching the imaginative capability of both children and adults.

Audio and Imagination

The ability to form mental images of objects and events not immediately available to the senses is the essence of human imagination. This unique attribute of the mind makes possible the ability to seemingly see, smell, hear, and feel things which do not exist in the present tense.

Through imagination we experience a personal world created from our emotionally charged remembrances, dreams, and fantasies. The sound of a Christmas carol, for an example, may bring a flood of images to mind. The smell of fir boughs, the taste of rich holiday foods, the sparkle of colored lights, are but a few of the multi-sensory memories a holiday melody may stimulate within the mind.

The power of the silent film, as a "mute" medium, was its ability to provoke human response through carefully composed images, the non-verbal action of actors, and the effective use of visual montage. Similarly, as Rudolf Arnheim notes, audio is a "blind" medium. It lacks the multi-channel characteristics of television and motion pictures relying only on the elements of sound and silence to communicate information or emotional content.

Audio is a participatory medium which actively engages the child in the on-going processing of aural information. This requires that the he or she be able to discriminate between audio stimuli, employ aural decoding skills, and generate meaning for a perceived message.

The symbolic language of audio is purely auditory. It includes the spoken word, music, sounds, and silence. Given that there are no other channels of information except sound, there is the potential risk of ambiguity in the interpretation of the message.

An effectively designed audio work may facilitate a child's integration of life-based experiences into a 'movie' created within the 'theater of the mind'. Each individual becomes his or her own movie director with no two children having the same imaginary experience.

The imagery generated by the listener comes from highly personal psychological experiences and needs. A dinosaur that a child creates while listening to a science fiction drama, for example, is not the same as one manufactured by Hollywood. It is a very personal dinosaur which comes from that child's own perceptions, joys, fears, and emotionally enriched experiences.

Kids and Audio

Educators have available a wide array of commercial audio materials for in-class instruction. These materials effectively contribute to the development of listening and interpretation skills when carefully integrated into learning activities.

The development of oral and aural communication skills can be further enhanced when children actually work with the medium itself. Audio enriches a student's ability to personally communicate his/her emotions and ideas through the use of language, music, and sound.

Unlike when working with video or computer technology, a child needs only the simplest cassette tape recorder to start exploring sound. Add to this, an open reel stereo tape recorder (check the media center closet), a small mixer like those available from Radio Shack Technology Stores, a microphone, and possibly a phonograph or CD player, and one has a classroom audio center.

There are many activities which media specialists, teachers, and parents can do with children to help them learn about sound; how to become more effective listeners; and how to use their imaginations in creating their own personal messages. The following suggest only a few of the possibilities.

Activities For Kids

Poetry. Children like to hear and read poetry written especially for them. Writing their own poetry enriches this experience. And this experience is further enhanced when children record their personal work.

Poetic expression can be expanded beyond words when combined with music and sounds. A student discovers the need to consider the effect the integration of these elements will make in the creation and interpretation of his/her poetic message.

Text Sound. Children seemingly like to play with words. We often hear a child repeating a word over and over - manipulating it to become familiar with how it sounds and feels. Text sound builds upon the concept that words alone and in patterns can create interesting compositions. In fact, text sound often resembles music in that one is working with the sound of words, rhythm, and phrasing.

Children can create interesting text sound compositions using a simple tape unit to record single or multiple voice presentations. An open reel stereo tape recorder provides additional opportunities. A text pattern can be recorded on one track and, after rewinding, a counterpoint word pattern is recorded on the second track.

This exploration of words and patterns in new combinations is exciting to children and

facilitates their use of spoken language.

Voice Compositions. Similar to text sound poetry, is the creation of voice compositions. These are in concept, more musically oriented than language based. Children learn to make specific non-speech sounds with their voices. Whimpers, sighs, groans, moans, laughing, crying, wailing, and about any other human non-speech sound generated by the voice can be used as a compositional element.

Students work together to figure out which sounds are the most effective. These sounds are then sequenced and "orchestrated". After several practice sessions, the composition is recorded onto tape. Such compositions require planning and coordinating skills. But the effort is worth it as students learn that the human voice can communicate feelings beyond the use of spoken language.

Art and Performance Tapes. Both text-sound and voice composition can be explored in combination with other curricular activities. For example students might prepare a sound track which is then played back in an art class. Art students would create visual images inspired by the sound compositions they hear.

Similarly, dance students could develop routines based upon soundscape works generated by students working with audio.

Audio Drama. Kids and audio drama are a natural combination. It is through drama that the imagination soars. Children like to fantasize and audio provides the unique opportunity for them to create all sorts of fictional worlds. And, audio dramas can be integrated into most any curricular area.

The dramatization process involves kids working together in the exploration of ideas. Children learn how to effectively tell stories and to write for the ear instead of the eye. There is a task for every student when it's time for production. Actors, technicians, musicians, and others to create and deliver sound effects on cue, will all be needed.

Of particular fun is learning how to produce sound effects for audio dramas. Students can discover the use of various household items to replicate common sounds. For example, a comb can be used to simulate the sound of a cricket. Salt sprinkled on aluminum foil will sound like a gentle rain when recorded. The goal is to hear a sound and try to simulate that sound's unique characteristics. Also encourage kids to bring their music keyboards. Many units have synthesizer capability which can be used to generate sound effects.

Listening to contemporary radio plays and dramatizations on tape will help students understand the potential for telling stories through sound. They will learn about the power of sound in creating imagery within their own private theater of the mind.

The exciting thing about audio drama is that it can be so easily done. There are not sets to construct; no make-up; no costumes to design and sew; nor lighting to plan for. All of the imagery takes place within the mind of the listener. To facilitate a rich imaginative experience is the challenge of producing an audio play.

Read Along Books. There are many commercial read-along books for students which are packaged with a book and an audio cassette. The book's content is performed by a professional reader.

Kids can create their own read-along books which may be used with younger children in the

school, or siblings at home. Students may want to enhance their production with the inclusion of background music and appropriate sound effects.

Sound Edit Programs. Computer technology opens new opportunities to work with sound. Students who have access to a sound editing program can do some interesting things with a computer and tape recorder. A political speech, for example, can be recorded on audio tape and then transferred to the computer. The sound is edited with sections re-arranged, particular words edited out, and other words inserted. This is a good way to discover how propagandists manipulate language to distort original messages.

Another idea is to record commercials from television and radio onto audio tape. These audio segments are then selectively edited to create a particular theme or message. This new work is then dubbed to tape and shared with others.

Summary

This article has emphasized the active participation of students in the creation of audio materials which facilitate the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. It is this power of audio to enhance the ability to imagine, that makes it an invaluable teaching and learning medium.

The ideas presented here, represent the tip of a much longer list of activities students can investigate using audio. Audio can be used to explore social issues, study soundscape ecology, and explore many other curricular concepts. These will be featured in future articles on rediscovering audio in the classroom.

Useful References:

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