

TELEVISION

International Central Institute for Youth- and Educational Television, IZI

Special english Issue No. 16/2003/1: "Childrens's Fantasies and Television"

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Imagine that!

The importance of fantasy on Sesame Street co-productions around the world

Sesame Street deliberately promotes children's powers of imagination; it intentionally offers gaps for stimulating the imagination and promoting "pretend play" as well as creative fantasies.

"Here, in the middle of imagination, right in the middle of my head, I close my eyes and my home isn't home, and my bed isn't really my bed. I look inside, and discover things that are sometimes strange and new. And the most remarkable thoughts I think have a way of being true." Joe Raposo, Imagination Song, 1972 (For "Sesame Street")

As educators and producers who use the media to help children learn, the question of the importance of fantasy is one that we at Sesame Workshop have considered as we develop our programming for children. In essence, we believe that television, if used thoughtfully and with intention, can be a rich promoter of children's fantasy.

I will describe how we use our pre-school television series Sesame Street to achieve three major aims:

1. Help children understand what fantasy and imagination are;
2. Promote the general use of fantasy and imagination; and
3. Encourage the use of imagination to problem solve.

The history of *Sesame Street*

To understand our approach to fantasy and imagination it is helpful to have a sense of how Sesame Street was developed. Sesame Workshop was founded over three decades ago at a time in our country's history when our President (President Johnson) had declared a "war on poverty." At the core of this declaration was the belief that quality education could help elevate children out of disadvantaged environments.

Sesame Street was, in essence, one television producer's response to this national initiative. The producer, Joan Ganz Cooney, had observed children as they watched television and was captivated by what they were learning from the medium and, in particular, what they took away from the short, well-focused messages behind the advertisements that inhabited the screen. She observed that children could easily memorize and mimic phrases and jingles from what they had viewed. Witnessing this effect, Mrs. Cooney reasoned that if television could help children internalize the content of commercial messages, it might also be used as a powerful tool to promote intentional learning. It could be of specific value to young children who, even in the most disadvantaged environments, had access to television and were watching it. Thus, Sesame Street became part of an experimental effort to harness the power of television to provide a positive, intentional educational experience that would help young children gain information to prepare them for school.

To assist with her experiment, Mrs. Cooney enlisted the aid of leaders in the field of education and psychology in America and other parts of the world. She called upon these advisors to outline the attitudes and knowledge that they believed young children needed to be prepared for their first school

experience. Her mission was to develop a television series that would, in particular, respond to the educational needs of poor and minority children who did not have the same educational advantages as their peers.

The educators developed a curriculum for the series which outlined a range of cognitive, social and emotional objectives. The advisors theorized that to be prepared for school, children in America needed to be introduced to basic literacy and numeracy concepts. Just as importantly, they also needed to gain competence in social relations, perspective taking, health awareness and in a host of other important developmental areas.

Our model

Much of the success of the Sesame Street programme in the United States can be attributed to the way educators and producers worked together in an integrated fashion. This intimate collaboration was not a model for producing television that had ever been tried. Typically educational television was created with a school context in mind. Didactic in nature, many programmes merely mimicked the classroom setting with the teacher as the focus of the learning experience. Consider, for example, the educational programmes that featured a teacher at a black board spewing off algebraic equations. This type of programme did not fully realize the visual and emotive strengths of television. This was because educational television was not frequently produced with entertainment in mind. In contrast, Sesame Street was designed to be entertaining and fun. It is successful because it was produced using a model that brings educators and producers together from the conception of the programme until its broadcast. And this collaboration results in a kind of happy tension in which educators push for sound educational practices while producers strive for creative entertainment. The result is a television series in which the educational aspects are entertaining and the entertaining aspects are educational.

Sesame Street international

Because Sesame Street was as successful as it was in the United States, producers from other parts of the world became interested in the series. But they didn't want a dubbed version of the American programme. They wanted, instead, something that would meaningfully speak to the educational needs of children in their own countries. (One example of an international co-production is created in Germany where *Sesamstrasse*, one of twenty international co-productions of the series, will soon be celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. As in the United States, these co-productions have been developed using a model that brings together researchers and educators. Conceived and executed by local teams, the programmes reflect regional values and educational practices. To maximize their cultural relevance, each programme has its own characters and takes place in its own local setting. For example, in Germany, one of the primary characters is a big bear who does not appear on any other Sesame Street programme, while in Poland, a dragon donned the screen, and in China a very entertaining young pig is a lead character. In Mexico the setting of the show is a large community plaza, whereas in Norway the show takes place at a train station, and in Russia it is a courtyard.

***Sesame Street* and imagination**

As different as the programmes are, they all retain an essence of Sesame Street. And part of that essence is an appreciation for the importance of fantasy and imagination. Let me describe how imagination has been used on the series. Sesame Street is constructed using a magazine format made up of studio, live action and animation segments that are linked together to form each episode. Each segment presents a single educational objective from the series' curriculum. With respect to imagination, for the programme in the United States, the stated aims are:

- "to encourage children to manipulate ideas and the environment in their minds to think about how things work or what may happen;" and
- "to encourage children to engage in pretend play on their own and/or with others."

On the series, these goals are promoted in three basic ways:

First, some segments are designed to merely introduce children to the concept of imagination and fantasy. Such segments help bring the words into children's vocabularies and help them to understand them conceptually.

Secondly, some segments model the use of imagination and fantasy and help children see how others use their imaginations. Such segments can provide content and a point of departure for fantasy. In this way, television can nurture a disposition to think imaginatively and increase opportunities for fantasy by

inviting viewers to engage in stimulating activities that both physically and cognitively challenge them. Such segments show children participating in fantasy play in a wide range of pursuits such as singing, dancing, counting, drawing and pretending. In some instances, characters pretend that they are someone or something else. In other cases, they imagine that objects or situations are different than they are. To promote such activity we strive to feature characters that are enthusiastic about thinking creatively and imaginatively and who engage in creative thinking as an inherent and natural aspect of their daily lives. We want children to recognize that their imaginations are an entertaining and engaging tool they can use as a source of entertainment and gratification.

Finally, some segments are geared directly toward helping children use their imaginations to solve problems. Such segments show characters taking other people's perspectives, making comparisons and drawing connections. We aim to promote what a curriculum from one of our other preschool television series (Big Bag) aptly calls a "disposition toward broad and adventurous thinking." Such thinking leads to sharpened problem solving because it opens up children's minds to different ways of approaching situations and challenges. Such thinkers explore various points of view, try different perspectives, go beyond the obvious and mentally turn problems over in their minds. Segments oriented toward modelling this type of thought show young children that there are multiple ways to handle a problem. Calling upon imaginative thinking as an instrument for problem solving can encourage children to manipulate ideas and to think about how things work and anticipate cause and effect. Here are some examples that you can only fully understand by using your imagination :

Our international puppet character, Ernie, visualizes himself as a variety of different types of people in different types of scenes. This is followed by a live-action segment in which children tell us what they think imagination is. Both of these are examples of ways in which our segments help characterize and describe imagination as a concept. In essence, they introduce the term "imagination" to the child's personal lexicon and concretely illustrate what imagination is (see fig. 1).

In addition to segments designed to identify and describe the concept, some segments model the use of the imagination. Such segments feature child-relevant contexts with objects that are familiar, recognizable common aspects of daily life (see fig. 2).

The animation, for example, features a cardboard box which functions as a vehicle for promoting fantasy. Here, a mother and child use their imaginations to transform the box first into a car, then a boat and then a cave (see fig. 3).

Another example of the ways in which our segments model the use of the imagination comes from our South African Takalani Sesame programme. In this segment children imagine that different shapes of clouds represent identifiable animals and other things (see fig. 4).

An additional short animation illustrates ways we use imagination to promote problem solving and creative thinking: A little dog strives to get a hold of a bone that is at a height out of his reach. He tries many different and creative approaches - such as attempting to get the bone by jumping and using different tools including a box, a trampoline and even a giraffe! - to solve his dilemma (see fig. 5). It is this kind of broad and adventurous thinking and persistence in trying solutions, that we try to model on our programmes.

The final segment comes from a new part of Sesame Street called Elmo's World. No discussion of Sesame Street and imagination would be complete without mentioning this 15-minute "show within a show" that is placed at the end of each Sesame Street programme in the United States. Featuring an engaging puppet character, Elmo, the series invites viewers to enter Elmo's imagination. Designed to foster curiosity and exploration the series focuses on child-centred topics (such as shoes, books, music and balls) viewed from a three-year-old's point of view.

In one segment, Elmo's pet fish Dorothy (a real goldfish in a round glass fishbowl who serves as Elmo's companion and alter-ego), imagines that Elmo is a fish like she and then several other animals (see fig. 6). In showing a recognizable, well-liked character in different situations becoming something other than he is, children gain an appreciation of such fantastic possibilities for themselves.

As we consider these various types of segments, it is important to keep in mind that Sesame Street was designed to respond to the specific educational needs of poor children, many of whom live in environments that lack stimulation. Often these children live in situations in which they are not exposed to books, music or other sources of inspiration to promote learning and imaginative play. Rather than entering the debate of whether or not television destroys fantasy, at Sesame Workshop we build from the belief that, like it or not, children are watching television and for some children it is a primary source of learning and entertainment. We then, as educators, have a responsibility toward putting on the screen the best possible television that we can. We, therefore, strive in our programmes to provide stimulation

that offers children a basis for understanding that they have an imagination that they can call upon. We aim, as well, to give them rich content for their imaginations and encouragement to use their imaginations in the general courses of their daily activities.

I will conclude with a quote from Einstein, who reminds us that "imagination is more important than knowledge."¹ At the core of this sentiment is the belief that it is through our imaginations that we explore the world and learn new skills. We can conclude that one of the most powerful and important contributions Sesame Street makes to children's education is to introduce the concept of fantasy and encourage the use of imagination as a means to fully engage with and learn from the world.

NOTE

¹ From "What Life Means to Einstein," Saturday Evening Post, October 26, 1929; reprinted in "On Science," in Cosmic Religion, 1997.

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