



BY KAREN ZILL

A look at the experts in child development and education who ensure that programs and Web sites are accurate and age-appropriate.

TELEVISION IS OFTEN CALLED THE WORLD'S BIGGEST classroom. It shows us places, people, cultures, and activities we might never come across in our daily lives. For better or worse, television teaches us about a lot of things, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes deliberately. Between the programs whose deliberate aim is to educate and those that are meant as entertainment are the shows that combine appealing entertainment with high learning value. A lot of thought, planning, and evaluation goes into creating such programs, and the producers rely on a variety of expertise to ensure that their programs are a source of positive learning. Let's take an inside look at how the experts help some cable networks reach that goal of solid learning in an attractive entertainment package.

News Fit for Kids

The content of *CNN Student News*, a 10-minute weekday news show, is drawn from regular CNN news broadcasts. Gerald Smith, *CNN Student News* producer, is the "eyes and ears" of its content. Each day he looks at all of CNN's stories to make preliminary choices for the student program, which airs on CNN Headline News and also on the CNN Student News Web site. Then Smith and Donna Krache, M.Ed., director of curriculum development, meet with CNN journalists and full-time education staff, all of whom have master's degrees and several years of teaching experience. Krache also taught high-school social-studies and business.

Stories are selected based on newsworthiness; the lessons they impart,

either in the traditional curriculum or in the area of life skills; their connections to the curriculum; and their relevance to the target audience of middle- and high-school students. In addition, Smith says, “Knowing the latest news not only informs, but creates good citizens.” The education staff injects other curriculum tie-ins, such as a featured vocabulary word that appears on-screen, math calculations to be done based on information in a story, and maps to show where events take place.

The same team of educators and journalists develops companion content for the CNN Student News Web site, connecting news features with standards-based learning activities and discussion questions. CNN educators also work with publishing partner Harcourt to list Partner Resources, regularly adding new enrichment activities and materials tied to ongoing news stories.

Kindergarten-Ready

At the most rigorous end of Nickelodeon’s expert involvement are shows in the Nick Jr. preschool block, such as *Blue’s Clues*, which is researched every step of the way. Heading the *Blue’s Clues* team are Alice Wilder, Ed.D., an educational psychologist and director of research, and Angela Santomero, co-creator, executive producer, and head writer, who started at Nickelodeon while working on a master’s degree in developmental psychology at Teacher’s College, Columbia University. Santomero says she looks at *Blue’s Clues* for kindergarten-readiness skills, so that the games and other types of learning-while-playing activities on the program are similar to what might be done in the classroom.

The script for each episode of *Blue’s Clues* is read in storybook form to a group of preschoolers. Marsha Williams, Nickelodeon vice president of research, explains that it’s important to sometimes just show kids drawings of characters and ask about them. “We know, for instance, that large eyes and sharp teeth are scary to young children,” says Williams, who has a background in developmental psychology. Another group of children sees a rough cut, and the final cut is shown again to a group of children before it is broadcast. Child-development experts provide reviews at each stage, and the staff

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may also get advice from a content expert, such as a scientist or museum educator.

Other Nickelodeon shows, for school-age children, generally do not have a specific cognitive curriculum and therefore undergo a less rigorous development process. Once there is a good idea or premise, some educational objectives, and perhaps characters, Nickelodeon brings in advisors—usually one or two authorities on education or child psychology and an expert in media production for the age group—to make sure the themes, characters, and content are all appropriate.

Connected Learning

At Noggin, the focus is on content knowledge. The network’s 12 hours of daily preschool programming spans multiple subject areas, including science, music, and math. As director of education Russell Miller points out, “The more

kids know coming to school, the more successful they are going forward.”

In developing original programs, Noggin assigns educational advisors to work with program creators to determine goals, format, and production techniques that make the shows’ educational content clear and comprehensible. Projects are developed for TV and the Web as complementary pieces—TV introduces new knowledge and the Web provides a place to practice using it. Advisors have both education backgrounds and special skills in TV and Web development, and most have worked at Nickelodeon or Sesame Workshop, Noggin’s “founding parents.”

Noggin also utilizes the sizeable existing body of program research done over the years by both producers and independent academics. Its approach builds on earlier innovations, such as *Blue’s Clues*’ interactivity and *Sesame Street*’s comprehensive curriculum. The network’s underlying philosophy of “connected learning,” forged by Miller and based on the principles of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, helps children connect what they learn from Noggin programs with their own life experiences and with new, non-TV learning.

Education Experts

To select programs for Discovery’s school-oriented program blocks, Assignment Discovery and *TLC Elementary School*, teacher advisors review national and state curriculum standards and look for programs that align with those standards on a variety of Discovery networks. For example, *The Wreck of the Portland* (from The Science Channel) focuses on the science behind finding and recovering a shipwreck, but has relevance for teaching history and social studies. Teachers also recommend ways to shorten programs for classroom use and write the pre- and post-viewing questions that appear onscreen. Discovery’s education consultants also develop and review the teacher’s guides and online lesson plans that support the television programs.

According to Edward de Leon, editorial director for Discovery Channel Education, Discovery also asks educators to review videos; test software, lesson plans, and videos; and advise on story ideas and scripts for the

Educational Advice

SOME ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMS MAY purposely impart health, safety, and other information, usually through a popular character. Mediascope, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization, brings together TV producers and issue-based groups in roundtable discussions to share information and encourage positive, accurate portrayals in programs. For example, a roundtable in May shared results of a content analysis of how health behavior is portrayed in children's programs and generated a discussion of alternative portrayals. Afterward, producers may choose to incorporate the information into their programs, for example, by showing a character washing her hands after playing with the dog and before eating a cookie. According to Donna Mitroff, Ph.D., Mediascope president, this kind of "teaching" is very effective because "research shows that when you watch television for entertainment, you're in a relaxed state of mind, a 'flow state.' You identify with the characters and resistance to learning is lowered."

Some are uncomfortable with social marketing, which uses advertising techniques to "sell" a behavior, and social modeling, which acts out behaviors that people may imitate. Mitroff agrees that there are cases when these approaches are not desirable, but otherwise feels that these are tools that can improve the messages in media. And anecdotal evidence indicates how effective this type of "teaching" can be, from the celebrated instance of *Happy Days* character Fonzie getting a library card—which was followed by a 500 percent increase in library-card applications around the country—to a child who, more recently, saved his younger sibling using the Heimlich maneuver, something he had seen in an animated children's TV program.



Making History

According to Libby O'Connell, Ph.D., The History Channel's vice president and historian in residence, the goals of her staff are "to make something useful, provide content beyond the textbook, support different learning styles, make content relevant, and keep students interested." When creating a new production, researchers work with script writers and producers with twin goals of accuracy and dynamic narrative. History scholars are interviewed and appear in the programs, and they sometimes review scripts. Once the script is written, history experts may bring in different points of view that result in changes to the program.

The History Channel operates on the belief that telling a good history story makes a good television program. O'Connell, who has teaching experience and a background in the history of law, points out that The History Channel doesn't show "cleaned-up" history, but a straightforward telling of events, which teachers and students appreciate. As the program is being developed and produced, O'Connell reviews it and identifies the history learning standards that the program content meets. She and her team of graduate students also write the content for The History Channel's Web site, including the viewing guides in the classroom section, using curriculum standards and their own teaching experiences as their guide. <

prime-time schedule. Educational advisors from NASA and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) often provide their expertise to Discovery's dig-

ital Science Channel, and Discovery Health Channel also relies on academics and other advisors who are experts in particular subject areas.

Related Resources

Cable Programming

CNN Student News, HLN, M–F, 3:12am ET (on hiatus 6/15–8/15)

Blue's Clues, NICK, M–F, 10:30am, 11:30am ET/PT; NOGN, Daily, 3:30pm ET

Sesame Street, NOGN, Tu–F, 5am ET; Daily, 9am ET

TLC Elementary School, TLC, Fri, 6am ET/PT (on summer hiatus after 6/11)

Search for related programs and Web resources at www.ciconline.org/search

Program Blocks

Assignment Discovery, DSC, M–F, 9–10am ET/PT

The History Channel Classroom, HIST, M–F, 6–7am ET/PT

Nick Jr., NICK, M–F, 9am–12pm ET/PT

Noggin Preschool, NOGN, M–F, 6am–6pm ET

Online

Blue's Clues for Parents nickjr.com/home/shows/blue/index.jhtml

CNN Student News www.cnnstudentnews.com

Discovery School discoveryschool.com

The History Channel Classroom www.historychannel.com/classroom

Mediascope www.mediascope.org

Nickelodeon www.teachers.nick.com
www.nickjr.com

Noggin www.noggin.com

The Science Channel science.discovery.com

Sesame Workshop www.sesameworkshop.org