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THE MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS IN EDUCATION



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Film Forums --- an Adventure in Adult Education

How films can aid the library in taking a more important role in community education.

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THE Joint Committee on Film Forums' offer of financial assistance for a series of library film forums presented too alluring an adventure to be turned down lightly. Despite some misgivings as to the advisability of undertaking such a program in these times, the Memorial Hall Library decided to experiment and, with the cooperation of the Joint Committee, carried out a series of eight forums from February 15 to April 12 last. The underlying theme was "Winning the War and the Peace" and included the following subjects: Russia, China, Production Front, Propaganda, Child Care, Nutrition, Minority Groups, and Post War World.

The forums attracted one hundred and fifty people with a total attendance of some four hundred. All normal publicity channels were used: weekly write-ups in newspapers, posters in store windows, notices to organizations, special mailing lists, and the like. After all, the best publicity is word of mouth and the best proof of interest in the forums was that people did pass on the word to their friends.

Our audiences were composed of men and women from all walks of life—representing a true cross section of the town—housewives, teachers, a chemist, a chauffeur, mill workers, a barber, a civil engineer, librarians, a personnel manager, nurses, social workers, students, business men, a soldier, clerks. In the main they belonged in the 25-60 age group. As is not surprising, women outnumbered men four to one. Transportation restrictions certainly did affect our attendance since all but about one fifth of the group lived within easy walking distance of the library.

We were particularly fortunate in securing excellent leadership for our forums, both from within and outside the community. Four of the leaders were faculty-members from Phillips Academy and Abbott Academy.

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Courtesy New York University Film Library
Children on nursery farm depicted in "A Child Went Forth."
(Produced by Joseph Losey and John Ferno)

while leaders from the outside included a representative of the War Manpower Commission, a director of United China Relief, and the Director of the Boston Nursery Training School. Local leadership of forums does have advantages since the discussion can be better related to community problems and the program becomes much more a real community enterprise. There is no doubt also that outside leaders, who are authorities in their subjects, are eagerly anticipated and bring much of value to the groups.

The forums were held in the library auditorium on Monday evenings at 7:30, an hour which proved rather too early for many people. The librarian presided, briefly introduced the subject for discussion, announced the films with any comment necessary, introduced the leader, called attention to the library's

books, magazines and pamphlets available for loan, and reminded the audience of the next film forum to come.

Two or three films were shown each evening with a running time of twenty to thirty-five minutes. Discussion did not necessarily confine itself to the films, but the films do provide the group with a common experience and supply points of departure from which discussion can stem. Good discussion films are not available in all subjects, but even purely factual films provide atmosphere and background. Several OWI films were shown, the best of which are excellent. The film *Divide and Conquer*, however, came in for much criticism since the group felt that it incorporated the worst features of the very type of "propaganda" that it sought to expose. The following films used should be given special mention because of technical excellence, conception, and discussion value: *A Child Went Forth*, an extraordinarily beautiful document of childhood; *For Health and Happiness*, a lovely color film on nutrition; *The Arm Behind the Army*, an OWI film about the important part played by men and women in war industries; *The Western Front*, about China today; *The World We Want to Live In*, issued by the National Conference of Christians and Jews; and *Price of Victory*, an OWI film based on Henry Wallace's speech. Rental fee on the films used was a very minor item.

Where American films were not available British films were used. The British films were always to the point and often came quickly to the core of the problem. Their lack of technical perfection in comparison with American films oddly enough sometimes added to their charm. However the group did have some difficulty with the British accent. The only film shared with another group, *Price of Victory*, was shown to a junior high school group of ninth graders. More of this should be done when we undertake another series next year.

The discussion periods, lasting anywhere from a half-hour to an hour, were more enjoyed than the films. Each meeting was different. Sometimes discussion marked the high point; at other times the audience was chiefly concerned in absorbing the lead-



From the OWI film, "Wartime Nutrition."

er's special knowledge of the subject. We discovered, incidentally, that the subject specialist does not always make the best discussion leader. Generally the best forums are those led by people, with knowledge of the subject to be sure, who are skilled in discussion technique and the ability to draw out the group and keep discussion moving. Under the right leadership even a timid member of the audience can be induced to make his contribution to the group thought.

The success of such a project is apt to be measured by the size of the audience attracted. For film forums a small group is often more conducive to good discussion than a large one. At several of our forums it was necessary to terminate discussion while it was still going strong. There is something essentially sound, it seems to us, about meetings of this kind where men and women of diverse backgrounds discuss common problems with saneness and intelligence. Perhaps the best discussion of all comes after the formal meeting is over. Ten o'clock on many a Monday evening found small groups still eagerly carrying on, some entering the discussion who had not previously spoken. We know of some discussions that continued all the way home, and we should like to hope that through books further exploration of many subjects was made. Book lists were prepared for each meeting available for home loan. The number of books issued was small, but there was not an evening when they failed to circulate.

And now that the series is over? Certainly our first impression—now a conviction—is that the undertaking was successful and important as a whole. And there are the small things, mere straws of evidence but in essence near to the heart of the whole film forum idea. There was, for example, our first forum on China—eagerly awaited as an initial barometer of interest in our venture—on February 15. The mercury stood at fourteen below zero and our hopes sank almost as low. Yet thirty people braved the cold and we felt amply repaid. One cherished impression is of some boys, not noted for quiet behavior, who gave rapt attention to the film and the discussion, and gathered around the leader afterward hanging on every word



"Report from Russia" shows children working on the farm front. (An OWI release, U. S. News Review No. 4.)

as she told them of China and traced important places on a map. And there was the exhilaration at the sight of the group of over a hundred attending our forum on Russia, unmistakable evidence of the current interest in our great ally. In that audience was a young soldier from a nearby Military Police Post who had dropped in very casually and stayed to take part in the discussion. His comments and freshness of viewpoint brought heartening reassurance that, despite many comments to the contrary, our young men in the armed forces are really thinking. Ranking high among our impressions will always be the splendid forum on Minority Groups, which for some marked the high point in our program. It was not that the forum decided anything, or that miraculously we caused the problem to melt away. We remember it because of the fine spirit in which we discussed our number one minority problem, the Negro, and because of the contribution, greatly strengthening our discussion, of a Negro member of the group. As one woman remarked afterward: "If you had had no other meeting save this one it would have justified the series."

Enthusiastic comments from forum attendance proved that there is a real desire for a program of this type. Many expressed the hope for a similar series another year and one constant attendant remarked sadly as the series drew to a close, "I hate to have them over."

Visual Instruction in Elementary Schools

(Concluded from page 333)

visual aids have been found to be excellent tools for promoting better public relations.

Evaluation

It is natural, of course, that the first evaluation of the audio-visual program should be in terms of pupil progress in actual class work. All experimental studies show that good aids, well used, increase interest, add to retention, and result in greater factual knowledge. We may then expect less retardation, a greater interest, and usually more supplementary reading in the specific courses in which the aids were used. The increased interest also is frequently reflected in other related subjects, and a general improvement often is noted.

However, there are other aspects in the evaluation of a planned visual-sensory program. Enlisting the resources of the community helps both the school and those who make contributions. Children tend to isolate school from normal activities outside. Here is an opportunity to utilize a natural social situation and develop desirable habits. Why not let the children write letters asking for permission to visit these local organizations? Then be sure that a note of thanks for the privilege is sent. Respect for property, desirable conduct on the streets and in public places are but two of the many social attitudes which may be developed in the children. Interest in the schools naturally develops on the part of those who are extending the favor.

Another problem confronting the schools today is the better use of leisure time. Motion picture appreciation classes and movie clubs tie into a program of audio-

Couldn't you possibly extend them?" "If I had known they were as good as this, I would have come to them all," was the comment of one mill-worker. Another said, "We are just beginning to catch the idea—it was rather new at first." Our leaders showed like enthusiasm, one of whom recently wrote, "I think that this experiment has worked out exceedingly well . . . It seem to me to have opened the way for more of this same kind of education in Andover another year."

Was it worth doing? Decidedly yes! And this despite the lack of startling statistics of new borrowers attracted to the library, of more books circulated, of further serious reading undertaken—all of which some might consider absolutely necessary as proof that time and effort were well spent. Some new borrowers were acquired and books did circulate as a result of the forums, but the statistics are not impressive. Yet our film forums brought results, intangible perhaps but results nevertheless, some of which we have tried to suggest. In addition, our program has achieved a spirit of renewed friendliness toward the library and a growing realization of its part in community adult education. Our minds are already tantalized by the prospect of a program for another year. We have learned much from this year's experience and we are the richer for the existence of a nucleus of interested men and women to whom the forum method is an accepted idea.

visual aids very closely. Children go to the movies so why not make them an educational tool as well as a good use of leisure time. If well handled, appreciation classes should increase the enjoyment rather than otherwise. Motion pictures, however, are but one item in the problem of leisure time. In written reports of teaching with various aids, one is forcibly struck with the number of hobbies developed and completely new abilities demonstrated by the children as a result—making models, new interest in phases of nature study that result in collections and wide reading, photographic activities, hidden artistic talents—to name a few of the many that have been reported. All of these may result in hobbies and lifelong interests which constitute valuable uses of leisure time.

Many students go through their school life without ever experiencing the satisfaction of doing a thing well and receiving recognition therefor. A feeling of inferiority frequently handicaps such students all through life. When we see the number of misfits around us daily, we all realize the desirability of doing something about it. A well organized and executed program of sensory aids will help enormously to this end. It is incumbent, therefore, on all principals to promote the wider and better use of all types of perceptual aids, not only to speed up and enrich learning but to encourage democratic participation by all members of the classes (and it will do just that). We must recognize that these aids actually can contribute to a better citizenry because of better training in schools—a training based on modern principles of the psychology of education for developing a well-rounded, integrated personality. Elementary school teachers and principals throughout the nation have a great responsibility in laying the foundation for this development.