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Creating an Educational Children's Show for Television

Mary Elizabeth Lizakowski

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CREATING AN EDUCATIONAL CHILDREN'S SHOW FOR TELEVISION

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of North Dakota, 1993
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1993

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This thesis, submitted by Mary Elizabeth Lizakowski in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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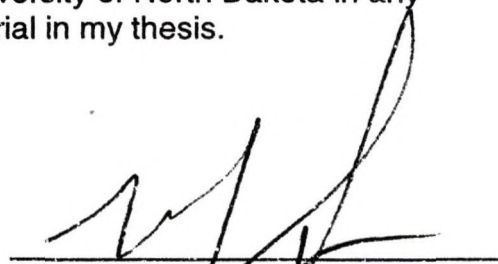
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Date

4-29-04

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To My Family

ABSTRACT

The process of creating Eat The Sky, a newly developed educational children's television series program for a contemporary audience of four to eight year old children, involves researching and examining formulas of successful shows such as Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street.

Using the four elements of respect, compassion, honesty and the engagement of young people's imagination through the use of puppetry as a foundation to build upon, this thesis explains the use of the above four elements used in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street and compares them to Eat The Sky. This thesis also explains the process used in creating Eat The Sky, which uses a magazine style of using multiple sections that contain the main theme of each episode. While Eat The Sky loosely follows the four elements named above, the show needs to be reexamined and rewritten to make it even more approachable for the intended audience.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides an overview of the process I followed in creating a pilot for a one-half hour educational television series I named Eat The Sky. In Chapter One I discuss four elements common to successful educational television. In Chapter Two I describe the specific steps I took to create my pilot to create a finished product suitable to spark the interests of programming directors looking for new material to fulfill their FCC requirements for children's programming. In Chapter Three I assess my work.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street, which are both going into their third generation of viewers, are examples of what is needed to insure a flourishing educational television program that have a positive impact in preparing children for school and life. The four elements I have selected for my review of content are respect, compassion, honesty and engagement of young people's imagination through the use of puppetry.

When Fred Rogers first started working on his own children's television program, he knew that he wanted to use television to communicate values he felt were important in our world (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks 163). In fact, the show has won awards specifically for "children's programming that actually taught them

not only the ABCs, but the real values in life, like love and sharing” (The Presidential Prayer Team). According to the Family Communications website, a not for profit organization that Rogers founded, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is still claimed as the longest running program on PBS.

The first element I have chosen to explore is respect. The Free Dictionary defines respect as having a courteous regard for people's feelings. In Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Fred Rogers's use of respect related directly to his television audience of young children. He held these viewers in high regard by speaking directly to them, and inviting them to engage in a conversation by asking questions and waiting for a beat to allow the viewers to respond. In his Kindness episode, after answering his telephone, Rogers asks his audience,

Do you ever answer the telephone? What do you say? Hello?

And then tell the person who's calling your name? My grandmother Rogers taught me how to answer the phone. I remember how kind she was to people when they would call her on the phone. They probably felt really good after they had talked with her (1988).

In this short amount of time, Rogers engaged his audience by asking the audience questions that they would be able to answer and then told of his similar experience with the subject when he was a young person.

The second element of relating to the child audience was Rogers' use of compassion. The Free Dictionary's definition of compassion means to have a deep awareness of and sympathy for another's suffering. A young child can

suffer greatly in many areas that adults find difficult to deal with as well, such as anger, sadness and fear when moving to a new home, death or divorce. An adult has found ways to cope with difficult situations, but a child is still growing and learning and experiencing new feelings and thoughts that they're not sure of. Rogers defined compassion in the way he related to children. He said, "I'd like to be able to let children know that they are not alone with their feelings-that there are other people and other children who have those kinds of feelings...the same fears and the same joys-to let them know there is an adult who cares" (Rogers, You Are Special 123).

In addition, he spoke about compassion in the context of difficult topics:

If you've watched Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, you probably know that our programs do not try to avoid anxiety-arousing situations.

We have dealt with the beginnings of life, as well as with its end, and with many of the feelings in between. We do try, though, to keep anxiety within a child's manageable limits and then *to deal with it*. We talk about those feelings and, in simple ways, try to

- show models for coping with them as well as models of trustworthy, caring, and available adults (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks 167).

One experience that young people encounter is a visit to the doctor's office. To some children, this may be a traumatic event for them, especially if they're not told what to expect when they have to engage in this unfamiliar environment. To help alleviate these fears, Rogers created an episode entitled

The Doctor, Your Friend. In this episode he takes his television audience on a visit to a doctor's office for a routine check-up on a young child where the child is told everything that's going to happen before being examined. After the check-up is over with, Rogers returns to his television home and asks his viewers:

Have you ever had a check-up like that? Did any of it hurt? Well, if the doctor has to give you a shot, sometimes that does hurt, doesn't it? Shots are like big pinches, but the hurt goes away after awhile. That's something I know for sure. And another thing I know for sure is that doctor's can't tell what children are thinking and feeling by looking through their equipment, or any other way. Only you know what you're thinking and feeling (1988).

By knowing what children may be thinking and feeling about stressful situations in their lives, Rogers was able to address them in a calm reassuring manner and letting them know that yes, shots do hurt, but the hurt doesn't last.

By addressing these intense issues, Rogers also had a responsibility to be honest with his young audience, which is the third element I will discuss. The Free Dictionary defines the term honest as habitually speaking the truth and being trustworthy. For Rogers, honesty covers a broad spectrum of concerns. He described one approach to honesty as follows:

We all know...that there are millions of children who don't have parents who sit down and talk with them about what they've seen on TV, children who don't have families to help them deal with the

feelings that are generated by television programming. Those feelings-if they are ones of stress and unresolved violence-can too easily be carried over into family life. I know this to be the reality, and that's why I have always felt it a duty to help resolve the stressful feelings we may evoke on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Sadness and fear and anger do exist in our Neighborhood, but so also do understanding adults who can help children distinguish between fantasy and reality, who can help children identify and manage their feelings, and who can encourage children to talk about those feelings with the real-life adults they love and trust (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks 183-4).

An example of Roger's use of honesty occurs in his treatment of Santa Claus. Rogers wrote,

How he became a symbol for rewarding "good" children and punishing "bad" children no one seems to be completely sure, but he certainly touches children and families very widely and deeply. Part of the Santa lore is that he spies on you when you're asleep and knows when you're being bad or good, and I don't think that's helpful for children, whose feelings about Santa are rooted in their view of their parents' omnipotence (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks 136).

To relieve these fears, Rogers created an episode where Santa is going to

visit the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Everyone is excited, except for the puppet, Daniel Striped Tiger.

He's plain scared...When Santa stops by the clock where Daniel lives, the first thing Daniel blurts is: "Oh, my! You did come! I'm Daniel Striped Tiger and I'm not always good! To which Santa replies: "Well, I'm Santa Claus and I'm not always good either."

And he adds, "Good people aren't always good. They just *try* to be.

When Santa goes to leave, Daniel asks him the question of whether or not he can see people when they're sleeping and if he knows if they're good or bad. Santa replies "Of course not. Somebody made that up about me. I'm not a spy and I can't see people when they're asleep" (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks 137). Rogers adds:

What we were trying to do in that television episode was to encourage children's strivings for wholeness. I believe that we were being honest, and therefore freeing, in declaring the inner privacy of self (Rogers, Mister Rogers Talks, 138).

The fourth element of discussion is the use of puppets to engage the young viewers' imagination. In Mister Rogers' Neighborhood young viewers found strong character allies in the puppets with honesty and compassion that they could relate to. This cast of characters included King Friday XIII with his in-charge persona, Daniel Striped Tiger with his shy exterior, Henrietta Pussycat and Lady Elaine Fairchilde with their jealousy and vainness, X the Owl with his

quest for knowledge. This core group of puppets have flaws, but they also have the ability to learn from those flaws and mistakes. These characters are also versatile enough to be inserted into any situation that the writers come up with. For instance, in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood of Makebelieve, the puppet characters, at one point or another on the show, were exposed for their character flaws and learned from them and how they could get along better with their peers and found joy from their new discovery.

The child audience also relates to the puppet characters on a personal level. Whether a puppet is attached to the end of our arm or extends above and beyond our human physical limitations, it no longer is a human, but a new creature with feelings, emotions and attitudes that may or may not be a reflection of their human manipulators.

At some point, the increasing distance from the performing object means that the actor's own body can no longer physically accommodate the role. Makeup and costume, prosthetic devices, wigs and body extensions help to a degree, but eventually the performing object reaches the limits of the human body's anatomy and must begin to emerge with a physical presence of its own (Kaplin, A Puppet Tree).

With this detachment, the child no longer sees the human behind the manipulations, but accepts the puppet as being a real living, breathing creature. This enables the young viewers to see a counter-character of themselves

through the safety of the puppets' actions. This in turn allows them to examine their own feelings and actions when placed in a similar situation. Fred Rogers has said of his show,

Often our puppets on the *Neighborhood* programs allows us to express those parts of our personalities that we might not be quite comfortable expressing all by ourselves. There seems to be a feeling of safety created by the distance between our heads and the puppets on the ends of our hands. That distance allows us to take risks (Rogers, *You Are Special* 53).

With the use of puppetry, Rogers' made a distinction between his real world and the world of fantasy on the trolley trip to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. He writes, "[t]he visually simple sets and puppets, matching the capabilities of young children, allow children to use their own imaginations and encourage them to create their own playthings and engage in creative play" (Family Communications, Inc).

This persona of genuine care and understanding of children's needs and feelings and giving those children a safe place to express what may be going on in their lives is what brought young viewers to the television set week after week.

This persona of genuine interest and compassion also lies in another long-running children's educational program. In March of 1968, The Children's Television Workshop (CTW), now under the organization Sesame Workshop, was established under the direction of Joan Ganz Cooney. This new

organization was the launching pad for the then proposed experimental television series Sesame Street.

In the introduction to "G is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street", Shalom Fish writes that Sesame Street,

was to be created through a collaboration among two independently headed in-house departments - one consisting of experts in television production, and the other of experts in empirical research, child development, and learning - and a cadre of outside curriculum advisors (3).

This unprecedented approach in creating educational children's programming has certainly earned its merits as Sesame Street approaches its 35th anniversary on the airwaves. "Sesame Street was—and continues to be—the most thoroughly researched and tested television show ever produced, and has received the most Emmys in television history" (Sesame Workshop). Created to educate inner-city children to school readiness, much of the credit for its success goes to the show's directors, writers, curriculum advisors and performers.

In Sesame Street, Caroll Spinney has been awarded two Grammys, four Emmys and was named a living legend by the Library of Congress in 2000 for his role as Big Bird. Spinney will be my focus for a discussion of the elements of respect, compassion, honesty and engagement of imagination through his portrayal of Big Bird in Sesame Street. Spinney has been performing the roles of Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch since the creation of Sesame Street. In his book,

The Wisdom of Big Bird, Spinney said:

Everyday on Sesame Street, we strive to give our innocent young audience the basis of a lifelong education. We teach some of the fundamentals of reading and numbers, but more important, we try to encourage children to develop the attitudes they need to live happy and productive lives: self-confidence, persistence, imagination, tolerance, compassion, curiosity, openness, respect, humor, and love, to name a few (151).

The first element, respect, is shown through the character of Big Bird, and Spinney's great respect for his young audience. When Sesame Street was in its first season, Spinney said:

[the writers] kept writing for him like he was the village idiot. He didn't have a clue about anything, and it seemed that he had no real purpose on the show except as a comic diversion. Certainly, he had no educational value. ...After about a month Jeff Moss, the head writer, sent along a script that initiated a very important change for the Bird. It called for him to visit a day-care center. ...When I got this script I thought, Why would the village idiot want to go to day care? What would happen if he did go? And who would want that kind of big weirdo hanging around with their children? But if he were a child, he could go to day care and play with other kids. Most important, if Big Bird were a child, children

watching the show could better identify with him. I decided that I should really be playing him as a kid, rather than as a yokel.

...Everyone agreed that was a good idea, and we went ahead with it. (Spinney 35-36)

This identification with the child audience that Spinney was performing for enabled him to have respect for their growth and learning process and the young viewers learned right along with Big Bird and his day-to-day activities.

The second element of compassion entered Spinney's world through a life-changing experience. In his book The Wisdom of Big Bird, Spinney relates his walk home from work one snowy December day in New York. As he's walking down the sidewalk he spots an elderly man shuffling along the sidewalk but never moving past the curb. Spinney's initial thought was that he was one of "the poor souls one often sees on Broadway-angry, disturbed, or simply drunk" (Spinney 127). Spinney crosses the street but is compelled to look back. The man is still in the same place looking upset and bewildered. Spinney goes up to the man to see if he was alright. It turns out that the man was afraid of falling and hurting himself since he lived alone and no one would be able to care for him if he injured himself. After Spinney helps the man across the street and to his apartment, he felt terrible that his first reaction wasn't one of compassion. Then it hit him. "If compassion is something lacking in the world, perhaps it's something we should teach on Sesame Street. Big Bird could do that. He could teach children about being compassionate" (Spinney 128).

Within two years of making this decision a journalist wrote “and then, there’s the compassionate Big Bird.” Spinney had accomplished what he wanted and said it’s one of the greatest compliments he’s ever received. “If that journalist saw Big Bird’s compassion, then the kids watching would likely see it too. I would really be doing something right, perhaps even important, if I was bringing even a little more compassion into the world through Big Bird” (Spinney 129).

The third element, honesty, was addressed by the cast and writers who decided that the program should present honesty when dealing with difficult subjects. When one of the main human characters, Will Lee, died, Spinney noted that the Sesame Street team “argued that, since our audience is so young, perhaps our story line should have him retire to Florida, to avoid dealing with the subject of death. Instead, it was decided that the show should honestly teach children something about loss” (Spinney 120-21).

Through the fourth element, the puppetry of Big Bird, Carroll Spinney, was also able to engage the young viewers of Sesame Street, and that in turn allowed the children to identify with the Big Bird character. A mother of a four-year-old boy on a farm in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan wrote a letter to Sesame Street.

Her older children went off to school each day, and the youngest had to stay at home with no other kids around. “The other day I heard Joshua crying,” she wrote. “I went into the living room where he was watching Sesame Street. On that episode, Big Bird was feeling very sad for himself, sniffing because all the other kids were

older than he and had gone off to school. Big Bird was alone, with no one to play with. Joshua said that 'Big Bird is just like me. He has no one to play with, too!'"

At the time I was forty-three, a grown man, yet I was able to play a child that a four-year-old could identify with and feel was his friend. (Spinney 37)

In summary, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street's character Big Bird portrayed by Carroll Spinney, exhibit the four main elements I feel are necessary to include when creating an educational children's television program. These elements of respect, compassion, honesty and the engagement of children's imagination through puppetry put the child audience in high regard by taking into consideration their intellect and level of thinking and providing characters that they can identify with. Through this identification they are allowed to grow and learn.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATING EAT THE SKY

For years I had wanted to create a children's show, but never gave it a serious thought as to how to structure it, who the characters would be, what the pace and editing would be like; in general terms it was a dream. But that dream began to take shape when a colleague, Anita Ramdharry, also expressed her desire to create a children's show. With her television background working for the Children's Television Workshop in England and my ten years in the television industry, we thought we could possibly come up with a viable show that would end up on the airwaves as a legitimate educational children's program. In the pre-planning phase I had spoken to Jeff Petrik, Operations Manager/Program Director at KVLV-TV in Fargo, ND. As a colleague of mine, he was able to start me out by directing me to the FCC website, specifically, the Children's Television area, learn about the Children's Television Act of 1990 and find out what makes a children's educational show FCC friendly (*Personal E-mail May 3, 2002*). This proved to be a good place to start, because it helped us with its guidelines as we forged along in the creation process.

Step number one for us was to toss back and forth ideas, concepts and

formulas of shows that have proven themselves effective. The main recurring element included humans interacting with puppets. We concluded that humans keep the show rooted in some form of reality, while the puppet characters introduce the idea that they can be anyone they want to be; therefore, they are able to live and learn lessons in their own world, be it fantasy or reality.

To go back to our familiar Sesame Street, a show that has garnered multiple daytime Emmy's, six in the past season alone, a past episode included a scene being played out between the humans Gordon and Susan and the Muppet Big Bird. The scene takes place in Gordon and Susan's apartment; the situation involves getting their young toddler to take his nap. Big Bird is left alone in the living room and decides that he's going to help Gordon and Susan clean up their apartment by putting their dangerous, breakable decoration pieces back to where their original positions were before the baby came along. When Gordon and Susan return and find the decorations back in place where a baby could grab them and possibly hurt himself on them, they gently tell Big Bird the reasoning behind putting dangerous items up high; therefore, the child viewer learns in a non-threatening way through the Muppet an important lesson.

After deciding that a puppet would be one of the main characters, we needed to make a choice as to what kind of a puppet it should be. We went through the puppets each of us created in the past, and the most interesting puppet that emerged was an alien. A friendly space alien seemed to be a logical choice to us to help further creative expression through made-up language

and individuality. Upon further discussion we decided that this alien crash lands on earth, but where and who does it meet? We decided that it will land in the backyard of a brother and sister. Using a brother and sister covers the male and female demographics. We also decided to have the brother and sister be between the ages of 12-16, old enough to teach the alien what it's like to live on Earth, yet young enough to show the viewers that the characters still depend on others. We also decided to have the main set be the brother and sister's clubhouse; this way they can keep the alien a secret and also to have a space away from adults. By diminishing the presence of adults the children are given a sense of empowerment. This empowerment allows them to be adventurous and have the feeling of freedom, but not to the point of disrespect for adults when they encounter them in the world of Eat The Sky.

Next we needed to consider the age group that we want this show targeted for. We both immediately decided on the four to eight year old category since we both have some educational background in working with children of this age.

So far, we have our main characters chosen; next we need to come up with a formula that we can fit these characters into and be able to continue with this formula for at least a season of episodes. We concluded that a thirty minute magazine style of programming, made up of several sections, but with an underlying theme in each episode, would serve our purposes. We backed up our claims in a report "Eat The Sky: Children's Television Programming Report". This report is a description of the educational and informational objective of the

program and how it meets the FCC criteria for educational children's television programming.

According to the Policies and Rules Concerning Children's Television Programming (FCC 95-143) adopted in April '95 it states, "Short-segment programs are better suited to the attention spans of young children" (1995).

Also in that report was a more controversial conclusion stating that a child was better suited to standard length programming. It reads:

Commenters such as the APA, CME et al., and Dr. Kunkel disputed the contention that the attention span of young children is too limited for 30-minute programs and argued that scientific data demonstrate that standard-length programming is in fact more educational than short segments." (FCC 95-143)

While you may be able to have more educational content in a standard length program, we still agreed that a young child's attention span does not last very long and will look for other stimulation once one subject has been introduced and briefly touched on; therefore, our choice of a magazine style program with multiple sections that contained the main theme of each episode would be beneficial in sparking the child's interest and maintaining a child's attention for a thirty minute show.

One main underlying thought in creating a children's educational program should be addressed as early as possible, and that is the overall message that the creators want to convey. In television terms this is called core programming. An excerpt of my report discusses this:

According to Instructions for FCC 398 Children's Television Programming Report that is "used to provide information on the efforts of commercial television broadcast stations to provide children's educational television programming as required by the Children's Television Act of 1990" each station needs to provide programs which fulfill the basic "core programming" criteria. This refers to children's programming that is appropriately educational and informational to its relevant audience. There are four main criteria that a children's educational program needs to fulfill: A significant purpose of the program must be that it serves the educational and informational needs of children ages 16 and under, the program must be aired between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m., the program must be aired in a regularly-scheduled time slot and the program must be at least 30 minutes in length (Lizakowski 3).

With those guidelines in place, we were able to explore the different fields of programming content that we felt we could cover in our thirty minute show.

The show we developed is based in children who teach and reinforce positive messages to the alien visitor. General areas include information about

their surrounding environment, safety issues, creative learning, as well as interactive learning with the target age audience. Our production became a discovery show that includes several of the core subject areas covered in schools. We brainstormed with a few of our colleagues about what main topics, crafts and stories we could cover in the show, the following is a list that would cover eight episodes.

Episode 1: *Transportation*

Viewers learn the history of transportation, are shown how to fly a plane, how to make paper planes and how to care for ponies.

Episode 2: *Animals*

Viewers learn some of the differences between animals and people, how to care for different animals and how dogs can be trained to help people.

Episode 3: *Food*

Viewers learn how the food arrives on their plates, what healthy eating is, and how farmers farm.

Episode 4: *Space*

Viewers learn more about the galaxy, what makes the northern lights and what the moon is made of.

Episode 5: *Water Sports*

Viewers will learn water safety and the importance of learning to swim.

Episode 6: *Power*

Viewers learn where power in their homes comes from, how to be environmentally friendly, and will be taught some simple physics experiments.

Episode 7: *Fire Fighters*

Viewers learn what fire fighters do and basic fire safety.

Episode 8: *Scrap Books*

Viewers will see a summary of all the episodes so far, and learn how to make a scrapbook to preserve memories.

The above are only some examples of what we proposed to teach throughout the series. Each episode had been designed to challenge a child's intellectual needs as well as teach social skills. We also made plans to incorporate a more interactive aspect to the show through the internet, quizzes and letter segments that will give a viewer the opportunity to make the process a two way learning process.

Now that the foundational guidelines are in place, I will explain how we came up with the puppet characters and how we gave them their personalities. The first thing we needed to do, was to get Anita's mother to ship the alien puppet from England to Grand Forks, ND. She had this done right away so that by the time we started shooting, we would have had a chance to play with it, see who would operate it, and of course, costume it. In the meantime, each of us went our separate ways for a few days and wrote a script that would introduce the characters in the pilot episode which we had already decided would be on transportation. This is a roundabout way in creating a character personality, but this gave us a chance to see what the other person was thinking in terms of how we saw the show flowing and how our different creative writing skills would match or clash.

It didn't take us long to realize how much our original views clashed. Anita

had imagined our alien character to be a know-it-all and would have some kind of comment on everything that went on until the brother and sister interrupted him. I had written the alien to be more inquisitive, would ask questions and relate the answers to something that it identified with back on its own planet. Anita and I discussed our differences of opinion and after stating my position that the child audience would be able to identify more with the questioning alien and be able to see the world through his eyes, we agreed to co-write the first real script utilizing the characteristics I suggested.

As the two main portions of the pilot script were being written and perfected, the alien puppet arrived. In our original scripting, the alien was a male named Bruno, the original name of Anita's puppet, but when it arrived and we started playing with it and trying out different voices Bruno transformed himself into a female named Cordelia. Cordelia comes to life by having one hand in her head to move the mouth and the other arm and hand in the arm of a costume and glove. Since Anita was more familiar with manipulating a puppet of this nature, she became her handler. This change helped create and shape our alien's characteristics even more.

The character fleshed itself out by Anita's ability to play with her little interjections more and had her throw in some "dah'lings", added a purple feather boa and made her into a Zha Zha Gabor from space. We also had to find a way to have Anita manipulate her in a comfortable fashion and also give Cordelia some physical shape. We pulled together some oversized shirts, picked one out

that we thought would suffice for a traveling shirt and installed my hockey shoulder pads. This gave Cordelia the shape she needed, yet also gave Anita the room inside the puppet that she needed to move Cordelia around. The shirt we chose was long sleeved, so it would hide the fact that there was a human underneath, and we added a white form fitting glove on the hand that Anita would use when Cordelia needed to gesture or handle an object.

Later on we also added another puppet that could serve as a character to help transition from one scene to the next and would also be the storyteller. Since we didn't have very many people on the project, we felt that we needed to create a puppet character that could also be used as a set prop. It would be something that would always be on the set, but didn't have to move around; and therefore could be shot out of sequence without having to have all the actors and studio crew on set at the same time. We also needed this character to be somewhat wise, as a sort of foil to Cordelia's energetic and inquisitive ways. So, with these criteria in mind, we decided on a grandmotherly-type clock character named Cukoo. I placed myself in charge of creating Cukoo while Anita was working on re-constructing Cordelia.

The first thing I needed to decide on in creating Cukoo, was her shape. Our choices included the style of a real cuckoo clock, a traditional grandfather "Grandmother" clock and a bedside alarm clock. Whatever we chose, it needed to be able to stand on its own on the set. It also needed to look like it would fit in with a children's clubhouse, so I made a list of textures that might

work.

With a basic idea of what we needed to do with the puppet, I took the knowledge I had learned in a puppet making design class at the University of North Dakota from professor Paula Linda Kuegal-Willis of Minot State University along with a design I had sketched in mind and set out to explore different fabric and craft stores to see what kinds of material were available to me. As I window shopped I took a look at wood, foam, fabric, papier-mâché and other different craft items; and as I looked at and handled each item I envisioned what it would look like on the set, how easy or hard it would be to create, to add a face that would be able to have a working mouth and manipulate on the set and what colors I could use with it.

I knew that the walls of our set were going to be a shade of royal/navy blue and that the set pieces were going to be children's playthings, so I wanted something that would blend in with the toys, yet would also be recognizable once the viewing audience knew who this character was. I finally came across a square, yellow pillow made out of a short, fuzzy material and stuffed with poly-fil. I played with it in the store, concluded that I would be able to attach items to it to create a face and purchased it along with a smaller, rectangular shaped pillow to give me a choice of sizes in case the larger pillow would not work with our set. The pillow appealed to me because its yellow color would be complementary to our blue set, would have soft edges that would go well with the soft curves of the couch we had chosen as one of the set pieces; our couch coloring of a magenta

color was also complementary to the yellow. The stiff outer material also made it easier to sit the pillow up by itself so that it could be part of the set without someone having to handle it. I had decided to cut a slit in the middle of what would be the back of the clock where the handler would insert his or her hand to get to the front of the clock where the mouth of Cukoo would be.

In my original design, instead of numbers, I had designed crazy shapes and made-up symbols as possible indicators of whatever project would be covered in the show. I didn't have any of these symbols created at the time that I started construction of the puppet, but I did have numbers made out of flat, blue project foam. To test to see what it would look like, I placed the numbers around the clock in the appropriate areas. I liked the way it looked, and rethought my approach to this aspect. If I had real numbers it would aid in the learning experience. Instead of Cukoo merely being a character used to transition from one scene to the next, we could use it in future episodes in a multitude of ways for the young viewing audience to aid in their numbers' learning process. Not only could it be used as a time keeper, but Cukoo could be used in matching quizzes and counting games as well. So I made the decision to keep the numbers.

The next decision was the construction of the face. I knew that three dimensional puppets are more visually appealing, but I needed to find a substance that would be durable, yet light enough to be used on the light-weight pillow and would also be easily attached as well. In the past few years,

Crayola has manufactured a product called model magic that I had used in the afore mentioned puppetry class with great success and decided that that should be the thing to use. It's light-weight, easy to form into shapes, with moderate use it is durable, can be painted and the projects made with it dry within 24 hours. After creating the face I attached the pieces of the eyes, nose and mouth by Velcro. I also added a set of wire spectacles to finish the look.

My next step was to write the theme song. We could have easily picked just an instrumental track to use from our music library, but many of the children's shows that are created have catchy lyrics that the young viewers can sing along to. I chose to focus on activities that would be covered in the current pilot episode and in future shows. Using activities gives me an "out" where in the future, if lyrics need to be changed, I can do so without changing the integrity or focus of the show. For instance, if I had chosen to focus on characters, and in the future we no longer have these particular actors or character, we may have to drastically change the lyrics and perhaps confuse the young viewers who would become familiar with the show. Knowing that I would use activities as the main subject, I then began to list them. I also knew that I wanted the title of the show Eat The Sky in the theme song as an identifier.

With the list of activities written out in front of me, I gathered our music library CDs that contained thirty second clips and listened to them as I envisioned footage of the activities and how the words sounded when said out loud. I knew that I wanted an upbeat piece and I quickly weeded through the slower pieces.

Once that was done, I listened to the pieces I had marked as possible songs to be used and narrowed them down again. It came down to two that I had strong feelings about and I listened to those two many times while trying to write the lyrics at the same time. The activities I had chosen to use didn't change in the writing process, but the sentence structure did.

The following are the final lyrics used in the Eat The Sky pilot episode.

Let's Go!

Fly a plane
And we'll play a game
And have fun throughout our world.

We'll fix the shack
And have a snack attack
And just be who we are.

We'll have story time
And make home-made slime!

We'll swing real high and
Eat the Sky!

I was very fortunate to have come across one of our CDs with an Indie flavor that also contained various lengths of the same theme I had chosen for the music opener for the show. These other lengths would be used as transitions between scenes and also as the closing show music.

In casting the roles of the brother and sister, we chose to forego the formal auditioning steps. Earlier in the process, I had a young actor in mind for the role of the boy. I had asked him if he would be interested in working on the show and informed him that it would not include any pay for the pilot episode. I made sure

that he got permission from his parents and made it clear that we would shoot around work and school schedules so that his normal daily activities would not be disrupted or jeopardize his health by keeping the hours short. The hours would be similar to those of volunteer community theatre actors. The same was also done with the young girl that Ms. Ramdharry selected for the role of the sister.

Before we started shooting, we arranged a meeting with the actors and their parents at the AeroSpace Network studio so that everyone could get a chance to meet each other and see where the studio work would be shot and edited. This was also an opportunity to get permission forms signed for the actors and answer any questions or concerns that the parents may have had about the welfare of their children. At that time we also handed them their scripts and a demo audio tape of the theme song so the actors could rehearse at home on their own time and be prepared when it came time to shoot each scene. We also gathered the actors schedules of their other activities so that we could arrange shooting dates around them and then released them after setting up our next meeting time.

We shot the outdoor adventure activities on two separate occasions in the fall just before the really cold weather set in. The miniature horse farm and airplane ride activities were shot off the shoulder with fun angles, swoops and pans for editing ease to go along with fast-paced appropriate music. The studio sessions were the bulk of the shooting process and we had an additional crew of three to man the cameras and audio. These proved to be a true testing ground,

since it appeared that the actors slacked off in their memorizations skills, compounded with the difficulty of shooting Cordelia in a way that would mask her handler.

After everything was shot, we then hit the edit bay in full force. I edited the show with the exception of the airplane adventure. Because the studio segments were shot as if the show were live, they were the least complicated to edit. I simply selected the best cuts. The adventure segments, while made a little more interesting with music, still could use some re-writing, but they were edited in a little faster pace. In between segments we added "Did You Know" factoids to add to the interest and help break up the individual subjects.

By combining the creative ideas, television knowledge and puppetry skills of Ms. Ramdharry and myself, we were able to produce an eighteen minute pilot episode of Eat The Sky to use as a promotional tool to get television programming directors interested in purchasing and airing the program.

CHAPTER THREE

ASSESSMENT OF EAT THE SKY

In assessing Eat The Sky, it seems to be missing some elements that are preventing it from being a success. Aside from the obvious lack of funding, Eat The Sky lacks a definite focus. Since this project was started, it has yet to have a mission statement. I am now the sole force behind this project; Ms. Ramdharry has since moved out of the area and on to other projects, which leaves me to refocus and, in a sense, re-create the direction that this show is heading. This situation that I am in now, as the one producer/creator left on the team, leaves me with quite a bit of freedom, but also leaves me with the responsibility of making sure that Eat The Sky reaches the level of a high-quality children's educational television production. In order to obtain this high level, I need to follow the examples of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street and to include the elements of respect, compassion, honesty and the use of puppetry to engage the young viewers use of imagination.

As stated earlier, respect is the ability to hold the young viewers in high regard. Fred Rogers did this by speaking directly to the television audience and engaged himself in a conversation with them. Carroll Spinney, through his character of Big Bird, identified with the child audience that he was performing for

and enabled the children to learn along with Big Bird. In the pilot episode of Eat The Sky, the puppet character Cordelia, like Big Bird, learns about the world along with the child audience. Like young children, she is experiencing people, places and things for the first time and reacts in much the same way a young child would in her inquisitiveness. She does however lack a certain joy and excitement about what she is learning and has the persona of an adult.

Instead of having her intellect on the adult level, she might become a very young alien. This would enhance her relationship with the intended audience. She also addresses the audience through short quizzes, but to improve the quality of her character, she could be given added activities when going out on her adventures on earth. For example, just before going on the miniature horse farm adventure, Cordelia could address the audience and ask questions about what a horse looks like before she gets to see a real one in person. The same style of quizzing and questioning could happen when she gets to the farm; she could see many animals and as the images would show on the screen, she could ask if that were the right animal that she's looking for.

The next two elements, compassion and honesty, in terms of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street, dealt with more serious issues than what's currently planned for Eat The Sky. However, they can be implemented in some way. As stated earlier, Carroll Spinney had a difficult answer on how to define showing compassion for the child audience. Having this awareness of how children view the world and their own individual experiences is a good

starting place when writing situations for the program.

To gain knowledge in this area I need to take action. One way to acquire insight into the child's mind is through observations of young children at play. By paying careful attention to what attracts them and how they interact with the world, I can note their preferences and then that behavior can be imitated through Cordelia. Another source to tap would be elementary school instructors. They work with young people on a daily basis throughout the school year and are aware of the level of intellect that these children are at. Utilizing the instructors' knowledge in this area could help mold the direction of Cordelia's different adventures.

The use of puppetry to engage the imaginations of the viewers through my four elements needs more work to be developed further. While Cordelia is a puppet, her full potential is not being utilized as a character that can do activities that the human characters can not. For example Cordelia should be able to voice her feelings more. One way to accomplish this would be to have her more intimately involved with the different adventures that she encounters. In the pilot episode, the two human characters were the ones who had the opportunities to experience the airplane ride. Instead of having them be the ones who encounter this adventure, Cordelia should be the one who comments and asks questions about the plane ride. This would give her the opportunity to give voice to what other young people might be feeling if they were given the opportunity. Instead of just asking how the plane flies, she could make comments about how scared

and excited she is at the same time, giving voice to what she is seeing so high up in the air, and just in general, being a vocal young alien. Even though she has flown in space ships before, this is a new experience for her and the young viewers would be able to relate to her on a more intimate level and engage their senses in a way that only Cordelia could do.

To summarize, I need to recreate Cordelia's history and flesh out her character more and change her persona from an adult to a child, seek out outside personal that works with children and have an understanding of their intellect, and I must utilize that fact that Cordelia is an extension of a human. As such she can do and say things that would make it difficult for a human character to bring across to the viewing audience.

Eat The Sky, in comparison to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Sesame Street, has many elements that need to be altered in order for it to be considered for television programming directors, but overall I have made a solid start by using the elements of respect, compassion and honesty that have been the focus of this thesis.

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