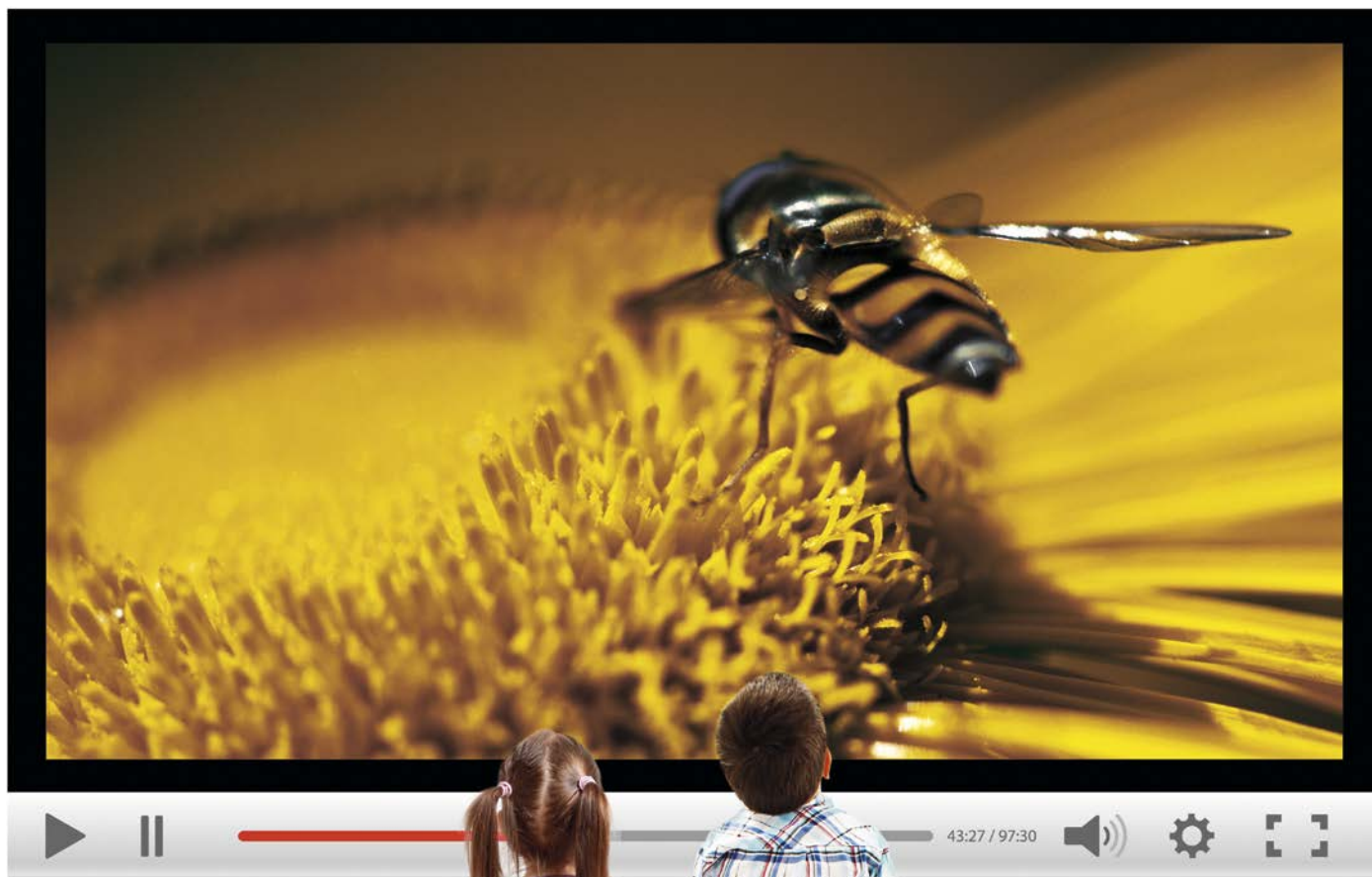


# “Children, be quiet and watch your lesson”

*The case for video time during class*

by MICHAEL J. PETRILLI



**A FEW YEARS** into my experience as a public school parent, I can confidently say that I know what angers us moms and dads the most: when a teacher puts on a movie during the school day. I don't care if it's the afternoon before winter break or the last minutes before summer recess: *If anyone is going to use a video to babysit my kids, it's going to be me!* Allowing our children to have screen time comes with a lot of guilt and shame; we parents might as well get some benefit out of it.

So I make the following argument with a great deal of trepidation: What if

watching videos is good for kids? What if it is so good that it should be part of the regular school day?

I'm not talking about the latest Pixar movie (although *Inside Out* certainly *could* be a great resource for social and emotional learning). I'm talking about explicitly educational videos that teach content to kids in an engaging and memorable way.

Here's why. E. D. Hirsch Jr. has argued for 30 years—and cognitive scientists like Dan Willingham have since shown it to be true—that teaching content is essential to teaching reading. While children are learning to decode the alphabet, which they

are doing significantly better since the reading reforms of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the other name of the game is to grow their vocabularies and background knowledge. Those two things are intertwined and closely correlated with a broad understanding of the world.

The ability to pick up any text and make sense of it depends in large part on knowing at least something about the subject matter. A book about *Tyrannosaurus rex* won't make much sense to a boy who has never been to a museum to see dinosaur bones, even if he can spell out the words. A book about Harriet Tubman won't make much sense to a girl who has never learned about slavery, even if she knows how to decode. Schools need to see building knowledge not as something that's "nice to do" once kids learn to read, but an essential, nonnegotiable component of building literacy, starting as early as possible—especially for low-income children, who tend to come to school with very limited vocabularies and knowledge about the world.

Yet the message is clearly not getting through to the nation's elementary schools. The latest data collected by the National Survey of Science and Mathematics Education (a project funded by the National Science Foundation) indicates that just 16 minutes a day in the typical K-3 classroom is dedicated to social studies and just 19 minutes to science. It's hardly any better in grades 4-6, where the subjects together get 45 minutes a day on average.

So what are our children and their teachers spending their days doing instead? They are supposedly working on reading, which, according to the same survey, gets an hour and a half on average in the early elementary grades, and almost as much in the later grades. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear to be working. While we've made some gains at the 4th-grade level (probably reflecting better instruction in decoding), reading-achievement trends by the end of high school are depressingly flat. Hirsch, Willingham, and others believe that's because we continue to teach reading comprehension as a skill to be mastered rather than seeing it as explicitly linked to content knowledge. We're wasting too much time in those reading blocks on ineffective practices, like teaching kids to look for the "main idea" of a story instead of teaching them about the world.

So what can we do to fix the problem? The most obvious solution is to beef up the time spent on social studies, science, and the arts, starting as soon as possible (in kindergarten, if not before). But another approach is to make better use of the time we spend teaching "reading."

Consider that the typical 90-minute "English language arts block" in the primary grades features "literacy rotations" through different "learning stations." The teacher works with a small group of kids on fundamentals—phonics, phonemic awareness, etc.—while she engages the rest of the class with other tasks at their desks or at stations set up around the class-

room. (Stations might feature, for example, phonics games, independent reading time, sight word practice, or writing tasks.)

But why not have one of the many learning centers dedicated to teaching social studies and science? If only we had a way to impart content to children who can't yet read that could be put on remote control, that was captivating, and even research-based. Hey wait, we do! And it's called streaming video.

Imagine a 2nd-grade classroom in New York. The EngageNY web site, which hosts a free voluntary Common Core-aligned curriculum, incorporates lessons from Hirsch's Core Knowledge Foundation. It suggests that halfway through the year, 2nd graders should learn about insects.

Now imagine that while the teacher is doing small-group instruction on decoding and such, the other children rotate through stations, including an online video station. During the unit on insects, the children might watch "The Giant Bug

Invasion" episode of the PBS Kids show *Kratts' Creatures*, two learn about "exotic bugs such as scorpions, centipedes, tarantulas, and many others." Another option is the French documentary *Microcosmos*, available for streaming on Netflix, which documents "insect life in meadows and ponds, using incredible close-ups, slow motion, and time-lapse photog-

raphy." After watching a clip, students could then construct a Venn diagram comparing two types of insects they learned about, providing accountability and insight on whether they've absorbed the lesson, and later go outside to see if they can find any of those insects in the wilds of their school playground.

This sort of integrated, on-topic use of streaming video is promoted by Lisa Guernsey and Michael H. Levine in their new book, *Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens*. "The proliferation of interactive media and digital video," they write, "has made it easier than ever to help children acquire [the] background knowledge that Hirsch, Willingham, and many other scholars have shown to be so important to literacy."

To be sure, streaming video isn't a perfect solution to today's content-free elementary schools. Most notably, some subjects are covered more thoroughly than others. There's a ton of good video content on science (from children's shows like *Wild Kratts*, *Sid the Science Kid*, *Magic School Bus*, and *Dinosaur Train*, along with nature shows on the Discovery Channel and National Geographic). Social studies and the arts, meanwhile, are mostly barren wastelands. Hey PBS: Can you fix that, please?

Incorporating the use of content-rich video into elementary school classrooms is hardly a novel or radical idea. It's surely not a silver bullet or 100 percent solution to all that ails our schools. But it might be one of those 1 percent solutions that measurably moves the needle. Teachers: how about giving it a try?

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**Integrated, on-topic use of streaming video can "help children acquire background knowledge that... scholars have shown to be so important to literacy."**