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# “I’ve learnt something ...”

## What children write and say about “learning when watching television”

**In addition to the ability to judge social interactions, children use learning-oriented programmes to obtain factual knowledge and as a means of behavioural orientation.**

Is it really possible to learn something from television? It is popular to describe learning as a process taking place in a pedagogically controlled setting where knowledge, attitudes and experiences are conveyed in suitable doses according to a sensibly planned, systematic sequence. During this process, selected content is transmitted in accordance with the level of the learners’ maturity and learning abilities. This is done by teachers acting as competent transmitters of knowledge. If this conception, based on pedagogical channels of transmission, is applied, most likely hardly anything, if anything at all, will be seen to be learnt with or via television. Children, however, when asked whether they learn anything via television deliver highly interesting and sometimes unexpected statements. Allow me to present a snapshot of the sub-study results of a research project in which the questions below were investigated.

- Which television programmes do children find funny and which programmes do they think they have learnt something from?
- What conception of learning is revealed?
- What do children think they learn from television?

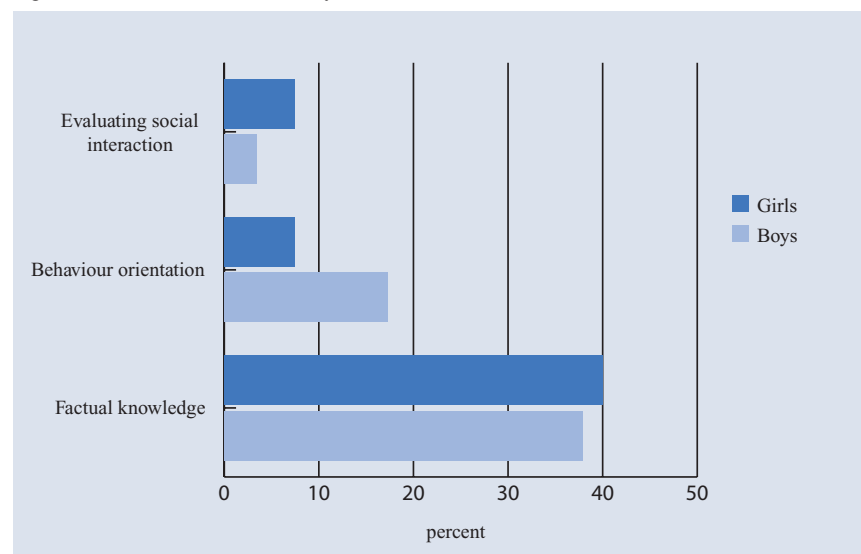
- Is there a lack of humorous knowledge programmes for children?

The data was derived from group discussions and school compositions written on the subject of “Learning with Television”<sup>1</sup>. During the group discussions, the children were asked if they could think of TV programmes they could both laugh at and learn something from. The evaluation of these ‘chats’ revealed that the children could think of relatively few. In the sub-study, which used “school compositions” as an investigative tool, it was also interesting to hear from the children’s perspective what they believed they could learn from television. They were asked to write a composition in class on the subject: “What I can learn when watching television”. This corresponds to what is a more or less naturalistic situation,

since most primary school kids are familiar with this form of writing exercise. For writing the texts they received a worksheet with the following subject: “You go to school every day to learn. You also learn a lot from your parents and friends. But have you ever learnt anything from television? Write what you have learnt from television and during which programme.”

All together 193 school compositions from the same number of children were evaluated. The advantage of this method lies in the effective acquisition of subjective text material; the disadvantage in the limited opportunity for subsequent investigation. The systematic evaluation of the interview excerpts from the group discussions and the separately conducted evaluation of the children’s compositions

Fig. 1: What do children think they learn from television?



both revealed – independently of each other – that the children believe they learn something from television in three fields of knowledge.

### a) Factual knowledge

Children, when they think of laughing and learning with television, very frequently refer to educational programmes for kids such as *Die Sendung mit der Maus* (*The Programme with the Mouse*), *Löwenzahn* (*Dandelion*), *Disney's Art Attack*, *Was ist was TV* (*What is what TV*) and entertainment programmes for adults like *Wer wird Millionär?* (*Who wants to be a millionaire?*). What the children claim they learn can be classified as factual knowledge. Alexander, 8 years old, says: “In *Die Sendung mit der Maus* they explain things to you. Last week, when I watched the programme, they explained how toilet rolls are made.” This category thus includes learning content about factual information or processes, i. e. pure factual knowledge (manufacturing processes, designations and terms, knowledge about nature and technology etc.). This declarative knowledge tends to be static and corresponds to the conceptualisation of traditional learning.

### b) Evaluating social interaction

The second field of knowledge is far further removed from adults' understanding and expectations. In the interviews the children also told us that they learn something from the problems and situations of social interaction represented on television. I have described this field as the “Evaluating social interaction” category, which focusses on ethical-moral attitudes and orientations that the children evaluate in both positive and negative terms. Michi, aged 7, says in a group discussion:

M.: *Ice Age*. You learn something, too. ‘Cos they got a kid, and they gotta, they gotta, they wanna bring it back to the people. (...)

I.: And what do you think you learnt from this?

M.: That you, that you, how d’you say? That you can also be responsible, ‘cos they had to bring the kid back, and there were some dangerous situations where you gotta stick together.

The cartoon *Ice Age* (2002) describes the adventure of a mammoth, a sabre-tooth tiger, a sloth and a rat-like squirrel. The adventure mainly consists of bringing a child back to its family. During the journey the animals face all kinds of predicaments; they have to overcome many problems together. Although the whole story takes place in a world far removed from our own, the kids recognise from their own experience social patterns of behaviour such as taking responsibility and sticking together.

The above statement, in addition to a host of others, reveals that children do believe they learn from television programmes that appear devoid of any intentional “educational character”. This interpretation of learning is better attributed to the area “attitudes towards ethical-moral orientation”, which is certainly not always regarded as positive by adults from their normative viewpoint.

### c) Behaviour orientation

Besides these learning viewpoints that tend to be based on normative standards, many children state that they are interested in concrete actions and patterns of behaviour, illustrated by the following excerpts from the interviews with two groups of boys:



A.: I learnt something from *Orky und die Kakerlaken* (*Orky and the Cockroaches*), namely when you’ve got hiccups you should give each other a punch.

I.: So that’s what you learnt.

A.: So what! ...

M.: *Asterix and Obelix*.

I.: What can you learn from that?

F.: How to punch. (laughter)

M.: It’s funny.

I.: It’s funny.

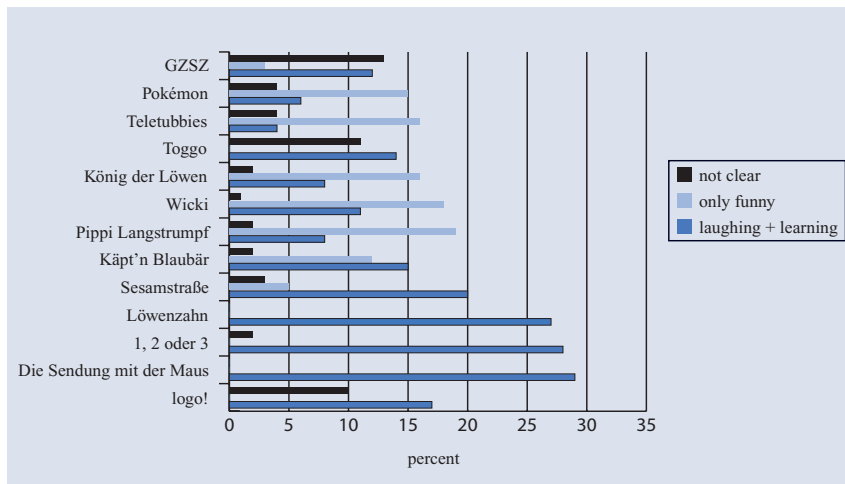
M.: You can learn how to climb.

I.: How to climb. What else can you learn?

F.: You can learn how to shoot wild boar.

While the activity of the first excerpt certainly could be integrated into the children’s everyday lives, in view of the second interview excerpt the “real learning effects” should be viewed with circumspection: children cannot imitate or learn a complex activity requiring a range of skills by simply watching this activity. What is evidently significant here is that the children are here referring to the way in which they understand learning. From their perspective, learning means “being informed” or “becoming familiar with” and must not immediately be equated with “model learning”. A person who has once watched tennis on television cannot play tennis yet; someone who watches an act of violence on TV does not automatically become a perpetrator of violent acts. Hence these examples do not impart knowledge of how to act, since the latter cannot simply be

Fig. 2: Evaluation of individual programmes



stored cognitively as processual knowledge but has to be learnt by acting on this knowledge. A more apt description of these statements would be (as a form of) behavioural orientation.

A learning concept understood in this way does, however, suggest consequences for the field of media education and media production. Including all the interview excerpts in which children talk freely about what they have learnt when watching television, Fig. 1 reveals the distribution of the results. The findings to date on “laughing and learning” have been based on children’s free, spontaneous statements. In another part of the group discussion the children were shown 13 videoprints of television images to prompt the discussion. They were asked to classify these images according to programmes they could “laugh and learn” in and “programmes only meant for laughing”. The images the kids failed to agree on were put on the pile “not clear” (see fig. 2).

### Evaluating individual programmes

Fig. 2 illustrates very clearly that the classical educational programmes for children (*Löwenzahn*; *1, 2 oder 3*;

*Die Sendung mit der Maus*) were unequivocally classified by the children as belonging to the category “laughing and learning”. It is also quite striking that the programmes with well-known, popular media characters (*Wicki*, *Pippi Langstrumpf* (*Pippi Longstocking*), *Käpt'n Blaubär* (*Capt'n Bluebear*) and *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten*/*GZSZ* (*Good Times, Bad Times*)) were put into the same group. In this part of the interview the results of the previously described, freely related “learning contents” were confirmed. Hence the following discussion in which a group of girls agree to assign *GZSZ/Good Times, Bad Times* to the category “learning and laughing”:

Scene of *Doug Funny*

I.: What can you learn from this programme?

D.: How to get on with each other.

R.: And not to hurt someone so much inside.

D.: Not to hurt someone.

R.: That when it's a love relationship, you don't just say: I'm no longer with you. (...)

O.: And you can learn, too, in a love relationship, not to leave someone in the lurch. Or to be too hard. Or, for example, when you're kissing, not to fool around but to do it for real. Or when someone needs help, that you have to be there for them.

This example reveals that, on the whole, the significance of “learning” should be understood as an individual construction of knowledge based on individual acquisition. In this process, children extend the learning concept beyond learning as a purely cognitive activity to the development of emotional, moral and social skills.

### Compositions by primary school children

The analysis of just under 200 children’s compositions reveals very similar results, regarding all the three fields of knowledge mentioned and the quantitative assignment of the compositions to these generic categories. The list of programmes in the following composition by Jan, aged 10, is attributable to the category “factual knowledge”.

“In *Galileo* I learnt something about poor people and how the longest suspension bridge was built in Japan. In *Welt der Wunder* (*World of Miracles*) I learnt how people climb mountains. In *Maus* I am learning how various things are made, for example brushes made from hair, bicycle chains. In *Löwenzahn* I learnt how soap is made. (...)

The composition by 10-year-old Anne can be assigned to the category “Evaluating social interaction”.

“I once learnt something... that if you are the victim of a bad joke, you shouldn't pass it onto someone else, otherwise it

will go to and fro... and eventually become stupid and boring. That's what I learnt in *Doug Funny*."

A somewhat different understanding of learning is revealed in 10-year-old Robin's composition:

"You learn something from *Die Sendung mit der Maus*. In *Wetten, dass...?* (loosely translated: *Wanna bet...?*). In *Wochen-schau (News of the Week)* you learn jokes ... In *Dragon Ball Z* you learn fighting techniques. In *Wer wird Millionär?* you learn how to answer. In *Was ist was TV* you learn about volcanoes, dinosaurs and about pirates. In *Galileo* you learn all sorts of things. In *Schuh des Manitou (The Manitou's Shoe)* you learn about how Winnetou is taken the Mickey out of. In *Kochduell (Cooking Duel)* you learn how to cook.. In *Sonntag lacht (Sunday laughs)* you learn how to make sausages with curry powder and ketchup. In *Traumhochzeit (Dream Wedding)* you learn how to get married."

This composition again underscores the problem referred to above under the category of "behaviour orientation". Useful for understanding and classifying such statements are synonyms children use in their composition for the word "learning". They write that they "came across something", "saw something" or "found out something". For Robin it seems relevant for interpretation purposes that he should name the (learning) aim, as he sees it, of every individual genre.

### Summary and conclusion

- The meanings children assign to content on television are different to those of adults.
- Children use virtually the entire range of television programmes as a learning environment.
- Learning in the sense of acquiring (factual) knowledge is only one feature that children refer to. Their statements show that in addition to the evaluation of certain social in-

teractions their understanding of learning also includes finding an orientation towards behavioural patterns and emotions.

- Children regard popular, up-to-date entertainment programmes as programmes with a high learning potential.
- Boys and girls have different interests, which may lead to "differences in learning".
- By means of television, children learn to understand the world, e. g. "How things work" etc., on the one hand, and themselves and others (ethical standards, etc.), on the other. They use both aspects in the broadest sense for coping with life's challenges.

Excluding these sub-study findings, from a theoretical point of view, what has yet to come about is the change in direction from effects research to reception research on "Learning with television". For once, learning has been understood to be an "achievement by recipients" and not the "effect of television", it is the recipients who have to be focused on. From the television producers' viewpoint this could also mean using the children's questions and learning interests as a guide for planning learning contents and not simply what is considered to be "childlike". For example, the questions sent in by children to the editorial office of *Löwenzahn* are a source of enlightenment: "Do fish drink water?", "Why is the sun yellow?", "Why do we get hiccups?" or "Does a cat really have six lives?". In order to arrive at meaningful results from the subject area "Learning with television", the children's perception of learning and their learning interests have to be described and understood more accurately. ■

Translated by John Malcolm King  
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### NOTE

1 With the co-operation of Anne Gärtner

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