

Curriculum Update For 'Sesame Street'

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

ANOTHER TUNEFULLY SUNNY day dawns on "Sesame Street," but Big Bird has the Memory Flu. He can't recognize his friends Elmo and Gordon or even his best pal, Snuffleupagus. "It's a flu only 6-year-old, 8-foot-tall yellow birds get," Gordon explains, and it's called Memory Flu "because Big Bird's memory flew."

So begins the show tomorrow as "Sesame Street" embarks on what its creators like to call its 27th experimental season. Of course, the format of the world's favorite children's television program, which has brought smiles and a letter and a number a day to more than 100 million preschoolers in 120 countries, remains comfortingly familiar. Comic skits about life's ups and downs, acted out by Muppets and their human co-stars, are snappily interspersed with animated and documentary segments that teach the alphabet, counting and simple social-studies lessons about coexistence. But regular viewers may detect some changes beyond the day-care center that Gina opens in the vacant storefront next to the Furry Arms Hotel.

The season's most significant new element may be the application of a fresh approach to restless young minds. Using recent research into "multiple intelligences" and the different ways children learn, the Children's Television Workshop, which produces the show for PBS, is increasingly presenting its lessons in overlapping ways, to reach those whose learning may be more closely tied to musical or mathematical abilities than linguistic ones. Some of this has been done before at "Sesame Street" — music, dancing and shape-sorting have always been part of the mix — but the effort is now more self-conscious and comprehensive.

In some ways, the new initiative may be seen as an effort to counter complaints that

the show is too wedded to kinetic tricks of the trade, truncating children's attention.

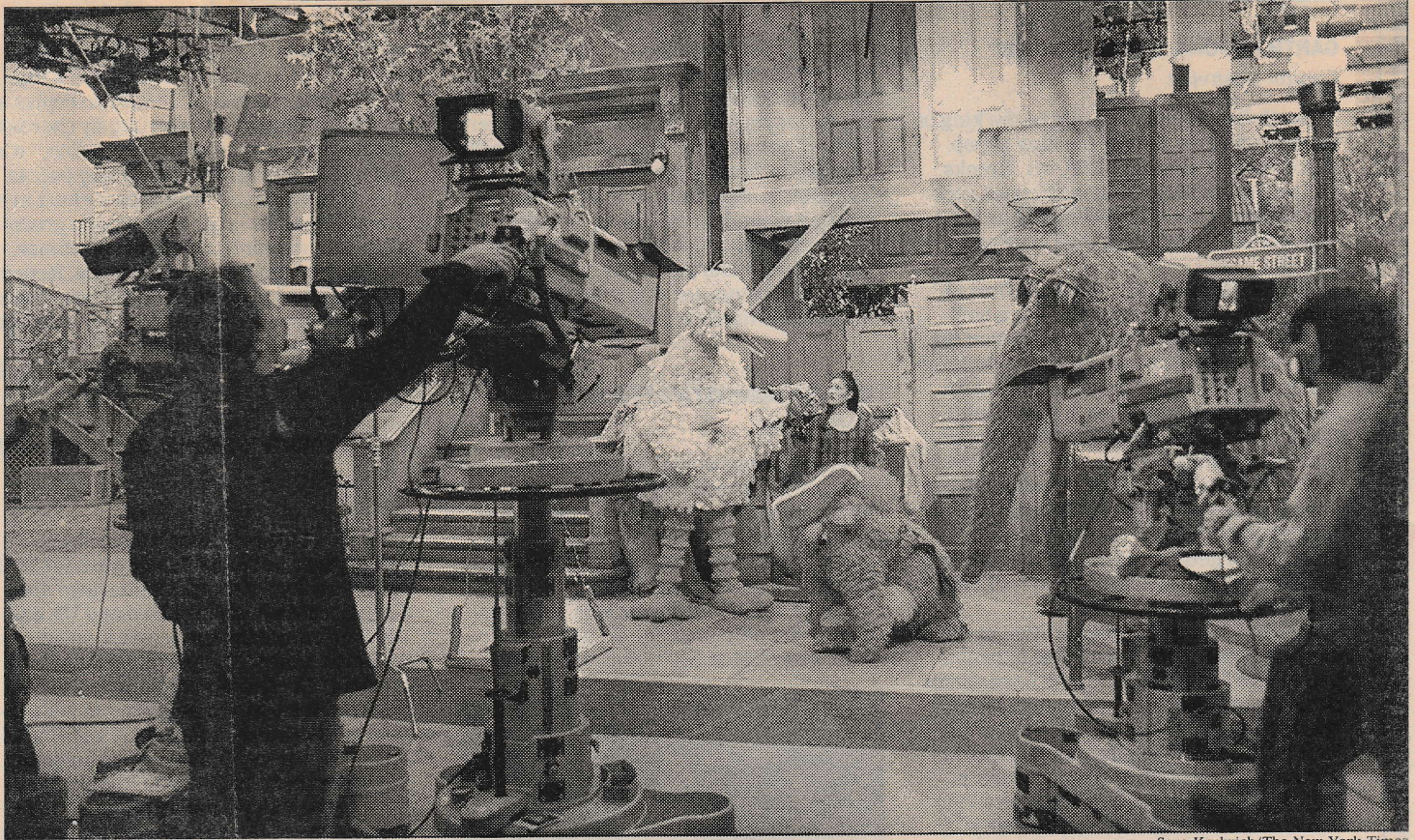
"The common-sense statement about young children is that they have a short attention span and TV is the perfect medium — you can keep cutting," said Celia Genishi, a professor of education at Teachers College of Columbia University and the chairwoman of its department of curriculum. "It's true kids don't have long attention spans, but if you develop something they get involved in, you can have much longer concentration." The new program segments, she said, could have that effect.

"We found that children have difficulties recalling the letter and number of the day,

**Amid the familiar
furry faces and the
comforting words and
tunes lurks a new
theory of learning.**

and we thought how we might teach them in a different way," said Valeria O. Lovelace, a social psychologist and assistant vice president of the Children's Television Workshop who has directed the research department for "Sesame Street" since 1982.

The show's creators turned, she said, to two education-oriented psychologists. One was Howard Gardner, a Harvard University professor and pioneer of the multiple-intelligences theory, whose work first gained notice in the 1980's. The other was Thomas Armstrong, a California learning specialist who has applied Dr. Gardner's theories to the classroom and whose books include "7 Kinds of Smart." Some children who are slow to grasp abstract concepts are too



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

On the set of "Sesame Street" at the Kaufman-Astoria Studios in Queens earlier this month—Big Bird with a difference.

quickly labeled learning-disabled when actually they simply learn in different ways, Dr. Armstrong says. Dr. Gardner has identified seven sorts of intelligences: linguistic, mathematical, musical, kinesthetic, spatial, intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Ms. Lovelace said that while Dr. Gardner's research has been discussed for years, it was Dr. Armstrong's work relating it to the classroom that "just clicked" and won over the show's creators.

"If you lived in a society that valued fishing skills, those might be the measure of intelligence," said Norman Stiles, a former writer for Mel Brooks who is the head writer for "Sesame Street." "I'm not saying that abstract skills are not important, but other ways of intelligence are important, too."

To reinforce the new theory, Ms. Lovelace said, lessons on one topic are to be clustered during an hour rather than spread out

through the show as they have been. One show in January, for example, will portray the letter "D" in three consecutive segments: first it's marked out in candles, then it's depicted in a sand animation, and finally it's shown growing out of the ground. This will be followed by three segments on another topic, rain. First, Ernie and the Twiddlebugs go out in the rain, then there is a rain dance in clay animation, and finally rain and wind are rendered in Chinese calligraphy.

In addition to being clustered, these segments are in tune with the new approach because they stress not only the visual and the verbal but also musical, interpersonal and spatial relationships, Ms. Lovelace said.

This may sound like a lot of dense theorizing given a show that often seems to cavort effortlessly across the screen, but intellectualizing and an almost obsessive introspec-

tion has long been central to the success of "Sesame Street." This, after all, is a show that goes to great lengths to measure its impact and tailor its scripts accordingly.

From the beginning, "Sesame Street" has been watched in test viewings by preschoolers whose reactions — including the time it takes for their eyes to stray from the screen — have been noted and charted. Since 1982, the program has been screened by panels of 15 children — 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds — whose eye movements have been recorded at 710 selected "observation points." Because reactions may not always tell much about what the children have actually learned, that is tested separately in interviews.

And that's not all they measure. Sesame Street Research's 164-page 1995 Muppet Study can tell you, for example, that Big Bird gets the highest approval rating from

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