
A Program Planners Series—The Seattle Public Library

ELLEN L. WALSH

DURING THE LATE 1940's it became evident that the women's clubs of Seattle needed information and help if they were to achieve their potential. The war had accelerated the pace of change, and the life of the city was different from what it had been and complex in ways which many residents neither understood nor welcomed. The clubs of Seattle, like those of other cities, have been a significant force in adult education and social change. Facing the new conditions of the post-war years, they needed more knowledge of community needs and resources for programming, and more skill in program development and presentation.

In this context, Grace Stevenson, then head of the Adult Education Department, developed a one-day program planners institute modeled after those presented by a few libraries in other parts of the United States. This 1948 institute proved to be the first of an annual series which as yet shows no sign of terminating.

The Central Library was demolished in 1957 to make room for a new building and in temporary quarters there was no room for a large meeting. The best solution seemed to be to take the program to a wider audience by changing it to a television series. Seattle's educational television station, in which the Seattle Public Library is one of the participating institutions, was interested and cooperative. The interest and cooperation have continued to the present. On television the programs have reached a greater variety of organizations as well as a larger audience. In the early years, attendance records showed a preponderance of representatives of Parent Teacher Association units. Telephone calls and letters which come after the television programs show that this disproportion no longer exists, and that men's

Ellen L. Walsh is Head of the Adult Education Department, Seattle Public Library, Seattle, Washington.

organizations as well as women's find the programs worthwhile. Television does have one inescapable handicap, however. There is no face-to-face contact between viewers and program participants nor between viewers and other viewers. Therefore, in the auditorium of the new library a workshop meeting became part of the annual series.

The Planning Committee. Each year, work on the program series begins with the formation of a planning committee. Throughout the year, the staff of the Adult Education Department builds a file of notes and clippings on men and women who have had noteworthy programs or who have ideas or contacts that should prove valuable. They are asked to serve on the committee as individuals, not as representatives of their organizations, and usually serve only one year. In addition to these are appointed representatives of the city and county P.T.A. and of the parent groups connected with the Catholic schools. These groups have been among the strongest supporters of the series.

Functions of the committee members are to suggest program content, to take part in television and workshop presentations, to suggest names of other participants, to develop segments of the program for presentation, and to publicize the series by distributing printed announcements or by other appropriate means. The planning committees have been of inestimable value to the series. Without them, it might have become repetitious and out of touch with the actual needs of organizations. With them, it has maintained variety and responsiveness.

Program Content. Analysis of series content for twelve years reveals four types of presentations. Those which were specifically on the subject of program techniques accounted for 40 percent of the total. Demonstration programs presented as examples of how to shape and carry through a program of a certain type or on a certain subject made up 27 percent. Club topics other than programming (parliamentary procedure, publicity, committees, etc.) constituted 12 percent. The remaining 21 percent of the presentations gave information on sources of speakers and other aids. One community resources topic is selected for emphasis and given extended treatment. For example, in order to help clubs approach the subject of race relations, one segment of the 1963 television series introduced a representative from each of the nine organizations which offered program help in this field. Each briefly described his organization and its objectives, then stated specifically what it offered to program chairmen. These statements were included in the information kit.

A Program Planners Series—The Seattle Public Library

For inexperienced program chairmen, basic information on the responsibilities of program committees and the content of program meetings is always included. Experienced chairmen appreciate new ideas on using members in programs, and variations on presentation methods. All enjoy the opportunity to "preview" new speaker talent which appears in the demonstration programs.

The workshop which follows the television series is designed to give what television cannot—warmth, involvement and face-to-face contact with experienced people who can give information and direction on an individual basis. Usually there is a morning session and an evening session, not identical but similar in the subjects covered. The workshop has greatest appeal for inexperienced people, although it attracts also those with years of club work to their credit.

Very soon after the opening of the meeting, some device is used to get each participant to introduce herself and make a statement or take part in a discussion. It may be a question such as "What was your club's best program this past year?" or it may be breaking into small groups for discussion. But, whatever the device, the result is a comfortable and freely responding group. A panel of experts commenting on club problems and handling questions from the group is a part of every session's program. To encourage groups to use significant films, demonstration film discussion is included. Experience indicates that book displays get little attention at meetings unless a specific time is provided in the middle of the meeting for them to be examined. The mid-session coffee break at the workshop takes care of this point. Brief talks and demonstrations on points such as introducing speakers, keeping the meeting on schedule, and so on have proved valuable.

Information Kit. All evaluations indicate that the information kit is the most valuable element of the series. The 1967 list of sources of free speakers includes seventy-one entries divided into six categories: Public Affairs, Health and Welfare, Handicapped, International Affairs, Race Relations, Special Interest Topics. No organization is included if it provides only promotional talks on its own work or need for funds. It must provide qualified speakers on its subject field, such as a discussion of mental retardation, not a talk on how the local society uses its funds. Organizations which are listed in the kit usually find that they receive a substantial number of requests as a result. Other organizations ask to be listed because they have heard of these results.

Speakers' bureaus which are listed supply six hundred copies of their topic sheets, giving full information on what is offered to program chairmen. The library adds book and film lists and useful guides for program chairmen, then assembles the six hundred kits for free distribution. Circulating copies are available after the distribution supply is exhausted. Each P.T.A. unit in the city receives a kit through the headquarters office. Others are issued on request and go to organizations of many types, ranging from the Association of the U.S. Army to the Y.W.C.A. Wives.

The Series as Television Material. The program planning series is one which appeals to a minority of the viewing audience, even on an educational station. But KCTS-TV recognizes that there are thousands in that minority, that each one represents an organized group within the station's area of service, and that sharing the knowledge and skill of club leaders through the medium of television meets a real need.

If standards of quality are to be met, certain inherent difficulties must be overcome. The series is primarily verbal and informative rather than visual and full of controversy. Therefore it must be carefully planned for variety and visual interest. The participants are often without television experience and need guidance in order to perform well. The television professional who is director for the series is a very important part of the team.

Results of the Series. Clubs have been influenced by many things in the past two decades, but it is safe to credit the library's series with much of the program competence which has developed over the years. Other results are identifiable. The community has benefited because of the acquaintanceship and cooperation among club people who have worked on the committees or have attended meetings. In recent years, significant contacts have been made in this way between men and women from Negro organizations and other groups in the community. Speakers' bureaus on a wider variety of topics are now functioning, many of them having asked guidance from the library on subjects and types of presentation. Several organizations have intensified the program training given within their own groups, using library materials and sometimes calling on the library for training help. For the library, the results are seen in requests for program advice, in organizational contacts, and in increased use of books and films. The series has to some degree achieved its purpose, and the clubs of this metropolitan area function better because of its existence.