

The Open Window: O.U.'s Largest Class

The University of Oklahoma's largest class doesn't meet on the campus. It's made up of viewers of "The Open Window," one of the nation's most successful educational TV shows produced by a college or university.

Producer-director Dr. Sherman P. Lawton estimates the program is seen by 250,000 southwestern fans each week. The half-hour show is given at noon each Sunday on WKY-TV and at 5 p.m. Thursdays on Tulsa's KOTV. This year marks the fourth season for Oklahoma City, the third for Tulsa.

Back of the show is a simple but effective idea: The world is a fascinating place in which to live, and it's fun to find out more about it. The program opens the window on a world full of interesting things, perhaps a lie detector one week and jet propulsion the next.

"The Open Window" is booked through May, and staffers have 200 topics in reserve. Already they are researching for next year's programs.

Where do show ideas come from? O.U. faculty and staff members make many suggestions. The more than 60 O.U. students taking TV courses regularly rack their brains for gimmicks. Viewers write and ask for programs on special topics.

Idea man for a show to be given next spring was Dean Earl Sneed, Jr., '34ba, '37Law, O.U. College of Law. He thought constitutional rights made an interesting theme. Crew members began hashing over ways the idea could be developed. They decided on a brief dramatization, a courtroom scene.

Hammers began to pound on lumber for a courtroom set. Student Elizabeth Land Kaderli, Houston, Texas, started writing an outline. Sneed and other Oklahoma Bar Association members are helping check authenticity of material.

Oklahoma lawyers and a judge will take leading roles in the production, one of the few "Window" shows ever to follow a set script.

The staff usually works from a flexible outline. After careful research, a rough draft gives the theme of the show. Cue sentences aid technicians in bringing slides and props into view at the right moment.

But after that, there's no telling what may happen.

Like the show when zoology prof Dr. Cluff Hopla had just finished explaining the ferocious-appearing spiders on display

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were harmless but the centipede was dangerous—and the centipede briskly clambered out of his box and started toward the camera.

Noise of knocking knees (not the centipede's) and shouts of terror almost deafened TV audiences. But the cameraman stayed at his post to record the hair-raising chase and capture.

Not all chases take place in studios. Students gathering grapevine to be used as props had to take to the hills when pursued by a snorting bull. A cameraman shooting scenes in the Wichita Mountains wildlife refuge set a new 50-yard dash record, with a buffalo running a close second.

Of the 60 TV students at O.U., about 15 assist part-time each year on the "Window" and there's a regular crew of five.

Lawton believes the actual working experience students get on the twice-a-week show is worth a year of experience as a green hand at a television station.

"Instead of being restricted to one task, such as continuity, the kids try their hands at the whole works, planning, writing, building sets, make-up and camera techniques," he explained.

"Being on television is a very humbling experience," Lawton tells his students. "What happens on the show is only the end product of a lot of work by a lot of people. The person at the mike often is the least important."

Before each interview, Lawton bones up on the subject to be discussed. "But just enough to be able to ask leading questions," he emphasizes, "and not enough to try to sound like an authority. The guests are the authorities."

While O.U. faculty and students provide the backbone of the program, the "stars" don't necessarily come from the campus.

Shows have featured and aided cancer and heart drives, Goodwill Industries, civic groups and state organizations such as the Highway Patrol, legislative council and game and fish commission.

In addition to this service feature, viewers' questions must be answered. A Scout master wants facts on Indian lore. A farmer needs a chemical to kill hookworms in his kennel. A teacher asks for a reading list on the fourth dimension.

Crew members, from their own research, can refer the questioners to sources where more assistance can be obtained.

Another value of the series is that O.U. departments aid in preparing visual materials, such as models and pictorial statistics. These are used later in campus classes.

Not satisfied with a full teaching load and two shows, Lawton is eager to expand—to give his "kids" more opportunity to develop their talents.