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History of Sesame Street

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History of Sesame Street

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Overview and Rationale:

In this module, students will learn the history of *Sesame Street* in order to provide important context for other modules. Students will learn about the goals of the program as it was developed and some of the key players that conceptualized Sesame Street and brought it to production. Students will also begin to investigate the role of developmental psychology and research in the development of the program.

Potential Classes:

This module could be used as a whole for a seminar class focusing on Sesame Street. In addition, parts of this module could be useful for any class (seminar or lecture) that utilizes the modules on Sesame Street including *Introduction to Developmental Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Early Childhood Education*.

Readings:

- Davis, M. (2008) *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*. Viking Press. (357 pages)
 - Chapter 1 addresses how the idea for Sesame was conceived at a dinner party
 - Chapter 4 discusses the beginning planning and fundraising stage by Joan Ganz Cooney
 - Chapter 11 discusses the format, curriculum, setting, name, Muppets
 - Chapter 12 discusses the Muppets and cast and making it to the first episode
 - Note: Chapters 11 and 12 may need a guide to the key players who are mentioned (bios or introductions for many of these people are in the previous chapters)
- *"G" is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street* edited by Shalom Fisch & Rosemarie Truglio (2001)
 - Mainly addresses research in Sesame but also includes history information
- "How we got to Sesame Street" by Jill Lepore (New Yorker essay)
 - [How We Got to Sesame Street | The New Yorker](#)
 - The first half gives a concise history of Sesame Street derived from/summarizing Davis's book
 - The second half takes a more critical perspective of the current programming
- "Our History" by Sesame Workshop
 - [Our History | Sesame Workshop](#)

- *Sunny Days: The Children's Television Revolution that Changed America* by David Kamp (2020)
 - Investigates the foundation of *Sesame Street* and other children's television programs such as the *Electric Company* and *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*
- "The Unmistakable Black Roots of Sesame Street" by Bryan Greene (Smithsonian Magazine, 2019)

[The Unmistakable Black Roots of 'Sesame Street' | History | Smithsonian Magazine](#)

Videos:

- Street Gang: How we got to Sesame Street (2021)
 - Available with HBO Subscription and on DVD
- Sesame Street: 50 years and Counting (2019)
 - Available to rent on streaming platforms and on DVD
- Interviews with Joan Ganz Cooney: [Joan Ganz Cooney Center - Joan Ganz Cooney](#)
- Interview with Carol Spinney:
 - ▣ Interview with Carol Spinney (AKA Big Bird & Oscar The Grouch) at the 2011 AAP Nati...
- First Episode of Sesame Street: [Sesame Street: S1 E1: Gordon Introduces Sally to Sesame Street on Vimeo](#)
- "How Sesame Street has Changed the World" TED Talk by Michael Davis (author of Street Gang): https://youtu.be/Orae8_6HjCA

Activities:

- Instructor identifies principles of Sesame in 1969 (hip, trendy, not doing too much at once, curriculum features). Students find sesame episodes or clips that illustrate how Sesame has stayed "on brand"--what are some ways that current episodes of Sesame espouse those principles?
- Given a list of key players in Sesame (Cooney, Lesser/Palmer, Stone, Henson, Spinney, etc.), students could create a short bio/presentation on how they got to Sesame Street.
- Davis's book (Street Gang) mainly addresses origins and development into the 1970s, but does not detail historical trends and curriculum changes in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s in as much depth. What can students find on how Sesame has changed across those decades (assign each group a decade)? What clips can they find to illustrate those trends?
- Students will compare Sesame Street to another children's television program aimed at educating preschoolers. What are the goals of the program? Does the program seemingly meet those goals? Comparisons could be made between older programs (e.g., Sesame v. Electric Company) or between current programs (e.g., Sesame v. Paw Patrol)

Related Topics:

- Research Methods