

Victor C. Strasburger

Why Are Teachers And Schools So Clueless About The Media?

My beautiful and talented 16 year-old daughter, a junior in high school, came home from school the other day in tears—she had not done well on a history exam because all the teacher asked was “names and dates.” She wanted to know why she had to memorize a lot of facts that didn’t seem all that important.

A beautiful and talented 13 year-old in Florida committed suicide two months ago after she “sexted” her boyfriend and the topless photo went “viral.” The school’s response was to suspend her for a week and to virtually ignore the taunting and teasing she subsequently received from her classmates.

Obviously, one situation is a million times more important and tragic than the other, but I want to know why teachers and schools seem to be so clueless about the media—both the impact that the media can have on students and how teachers can actually use media creatively, to teach?

I am a pediatrician and a media expert. For the past 25 years, I have helped to study the impact of media on children and adolescents. Yet there is one question I keep asking myself: If the average student spends more time (7 hours/day) with media than he or she spends in the classroom and are now so technologically “savvy,” why aren’t schools and teachers keeping up with them?

A recent national survey found that 20 percent of teens had “sexted.” Duh! Teenagers do dumb things! MRI studies have shown conclusively that the adolescent brain does not fully mature until age 25 or even later. “Sexting” should not be a crime, nor should schools respond to teenagers’ dumb mistakes by keeping them out of school. Yes, schools do need rules about new technology—Should cell phones be allowed in school?

Should laptop computers be used in the classroom when kids may be surfing the web instead of paying attention to the teacher? What sort of Internet filters, if any, are appropriate? But it’s not as clear-cut as it may seem: For example, a different school in Florida uses cell phones

in class constructively—the teacher texts the kids in Spanish, and they have to respond. Many parents use an Internet program called iParent to track their children’s attendance and school assignments and performance. In Georgia, parents can track their kids’ cafeteria purchases online to see if they’re eating nutritious meals. If teachers are concerned about their students not turning in an important assignment on time, they can now text them reminders. New technology is not the bogey-man!

But new technology also means shifting the current educational paradigm in a whole variety of ways. Why make students memorize facts when in 5 years, our wristwatches will actually be 5-gigabyte computers that will be able to recite, word for word, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, in Lincoln’s own Midwestern twang? A hundred years ago, to be “literate” meant that you could read and write. Today, to be literate means that you can e-mail, text, IM, and decipher and understand a bewildering amount of different media. But kids need to be taught exactly how to do that. Critical thinking should now trump rote memorization.

New media can be used creatively as well. For example, for decades, middle school teachers have bludgeoned their students with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Imagine introducing Shakespeare to a 13 year-old using a play about two teenagers who fall in love, have sex, then commit suicide? Abstinence-only sex education anyone? (Perhaps some of the \$1.5 billion the Federal government spends on it should be spent on re-structuring middle-school reading lists.)

I was an English major at Yale, so I love Shakespeare; but that love was carefully cultivated by my middle school English teacher, Eileen Henze, who began us on *Hamlet* and actually read half of it to us herself—performing it, as it were, with different accents for different parts. She was an elegant reader, and William himself would have been proud of her. After

all, Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, not to be read. He was an actor as well as a playwright. The play was the thing! His language could be elegant as well, but it is an acquired taste; and to make young adolescents immerse themselves in it willy-nilly is a big mistake. Better to teach them snippets of the language, teach them how to understand the language, than to make them read an entire play.

That’s how I would teach Shakespeare—with excerpts of the language, performed by moi, of course, and by using one of the hundreds of DVDs out there. I don’t recommend beginning with “R&J”—surely, not one of Shakespeare’s better plays. Personally, I’d begin with something dreamy, like *The Tempest*, or funny, like *Twelfth Night* or *Comedy of Errors*.

Teaching poetry? Using the spoken word is the ideal way to appreciate poetry. Listen to Robert Lowell read his *Inauguration Day: January 1953*. It’s hauntingly beautiful, the way poetry is meant to be, and far more effective than trying to read it on a page (I should know—I heard Lowell read this poem when I was at Yale). Listen to e.e. cummings read his poetry and follow along with the written words and letters. The poetry does, indeed, come alive.

For history teachers, I can offer no high recommendation than Ken Burns’ extraordinary “Civil War” series. Why read a dry textbook when the history comes alive on the screen? I donated this series to my kids’ school in hopes that they’d throw the textbooks away for the Civil War block.

Science? Try “Mythbusters” for turning kids on to physics or chemistry. Or the “Nature” series for biology. For human biology, medical schools now use simulated patients and virtual anatomy. No reason to kill frogs or pigs these days when you can see the detail up close and personal on a computer screen.

Perhaps the only subject that media can not be used creatively for is math, and I’m sure there are computer programs around that creatively teach

algebra or geometry in ways that are far more entertaining than the average classroom lecture.

So most teachers are ignoring an important and entertaining way to reach their students. At the same time, schools are ignoring the topic of media education altogether. Canada, Britain, Australia all mandate media education in the school curriculum.

In the U.S., we ignore media completely! No drug education class is complete without a discussion of how cigarette and alcohol advertising works. No sex education class is complete without a discussion of why birth control pills and condoms are not advertised widely on American TV, and how they could be (using examples from YouTube and veryfunnyads.com, for example).

Obesity has become an urgent public health problem in the U.S.—why not teach young children about food advertising? There is an extraordinary series of videos made by Consumer Reports and HBO in the late 1980s entitled “Buy Me That” that kids really like and that “de-constructs” food ads. Interpersonal violence has always been a problem—why not teach children about the issue of media violence and how violent movies are popular in Hollywood because they can be exported overseas with very little dubbing necessary?

In a nation where the average child or teen spends more time in front of the screen than in a classroom, teachers and schools are missing out on golden opportunities to use media constructively and creatively to enlighten the next generation of students. It’s a shame, really, that teachers and schools remain so clueless.

Victor C. Strasburger, M.D. is Professor of Pediatrics at the Univ. of New Mexico School of Medicine.

His recent book is “Children, Adolescents, and the Media,” 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.

E-mail: Vstrasburger@salud.unm.edu

©2010 Victor Strasburger 1/16