ABOLISHING THE SEPARATION OF 'CHALK AND STAGE'

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No matter what policy changes new Secretary of Education Rod Paige brings to Washington, American students should expect significant changes in the way they learn. There will be the traditional calls for smaller classrooms and longer school days, but changes I have in mind involve mood lighting, smashing special effects and the casting of celebrities. In other words, it is time to realize that the same people who entertain American students may be the best candidates to partner with educators to reach students. This partnership should occur even though parents and government have had good reason in the paste to lambaste the media industry for a perceived lax attitude toward education standards.

For too long, we have witnessed a "separation of chalk and stage" to keep the classroom from becoming a midway or an arcade of the mind. There is a fear of bringing the same production values to which students are accustomed in video games or at the cinema to the classroom. Thus, we have missed out on ways to make real connections with students by engaging their physical senses. Even with the advent of computers, students have primarily received information audibly or through textbooks even though studies indicate that students' rates of retention and learning are increased as more senses are engaged.

Students now have a better working knowledge and understanding of how the Electoral College works after watching TV news networks take us into the intricacies of how this ancient system works rather than exposure through basic civic classes. Being exposed to high quality analysis, debates and descriptions, most Americans have a newfound ability to navigate a stranger through the complexities of this particular Constitutional process. After three years of law school, I did not have as much understanding of those mechanics as I learned in five minutes of watching network newspersons Judy Woodruff and Greta VanSusteren as they utilized lively graphics, inventive flow charts and energetic commentary to make the subject come alive.

These short segment applications and lessons set standards for new ways to teach. It was relevant, of course, but the quality of those presentations made learning more engaging and compelling. Applications for better quality video programming in the classroom should extend past interesting news coverage, with original segments highlighting America's best teachers used to supplement in-class presentations. Today's student can travel around the globe to become part of the environment they are studying. Labs take on new meaning as students use the world as a workshop for ideas and experimentation. However, this must go beyond static images and slides and build a real connection between student and subject.

This occurs by capturing the students' attention with interesting music, lighting, talent and experiences transmitted via in-class video presentations or as broadband allows, over the web. Students are accustomed to multimedia. Half-hearted attempts to provide this method of presentation to "education customers" won't capture the students' attention. We need to add pizzazz to the ways we present Chaucer or Shelley.

I've heard two primary reasons for not being aggressive with multimedia in the classroom: soft content and distribution issues. Some argue that the inclusion of high quality video impacts the value of academic material that can be imported. As Edward Miller, former editor of the Harvard Education Letter has written, "Thoughtful critics argue that distance learning is frequently a counterfeit of education, replacing the essentials of learning with glitzy software and shoddy pedagogy" (Miller, 1998). More simply, special effects will reign over substantive education. On the contrary, quality video product in the classroom opens up the possibility to introduce difficult concepts or hard-to-communicate principles. High impact video forces the educator to be more creative in selecting the applications and processes used to teach. Some argue that the video products allow teachers to coast by, not preparing for substantive teaching.

Programming must also be produced in short segments that allow faculty members to develop the curriculums and add the informative segments rather than allowing the video programming to drive the classroom instruction. For example, at our company, we produce in-class segments that range in length from three to eight minutes to allow nuggets of instruction to be passed along without dominating the lesson plans. Allowing faculty to see multimedia instruction as a complement rather than as a substitute for high quality teaching allows for greater acceptance in the classroom.

The second objection is distribution. Some of the existing technology is cumbersome and difficult to use as many schools have outdated projectors and equipment. Most in-class video segments, however, can be distributed using traditional video players or through satellite technology. Regular feeds can join classrooms together and can be used to regularly update content.

The more promising avenue for distributing multimedia content is through the Internet, however. As distance education and broadband learning solutions become more commonplace, high quality video segments will transform the on-line learning environment from a series of chatrooms and talking heads to a library of compelling video content. Interaction will take on new meaning when users share common video experiences.

High quality video experiences create a common ground for users. Much has been written about the potential for distance learning applications, yet providers have been reticent about using broadband applications and have adopted a wait and see posture. At our company, we have a bullish attitude about the penetration

of broadband. Everyone recognizes the question is no longer, "Will broadband be prevalent?" Rather, the right question is "When will broadband penetration justify aggressive use of rich media?" Our most progressive clients are using this time of waiting to experiment with different broadband applications so they will be ready to strike when the moment hits.

Over the last four months, our company has worked with professors at Duke, Vanderbilt, and the University of Tennessee to begin transforming the way rich media is used to teach. The successes we have seen merit an examination of ways that high quality video segments can be used to enhance the learning experiences of all of America's students. The media industry has not done a good job of presenting itself as a protector or promoter of strong educational values. It's time for this to change.

As the media industry begins to show good faith efforts to improve its content and marketing practices, we should look at ways to partner America's educators with America's entertainers to create experiences that maximize impact and capture the attention of today's youth. As these partnerships become more common, a new wave of production companies will rise up or spin out of existing ones to specifically target the market. That competition will only raise quality standards and will insure that the multimedia produced is of the highest caliber. So, as the new secretary takes over, I hope he will spend a little time in Los Angeles, New York and even Knoxville, Tennessee. Increasing funding for multimedia solutions is a goal that should be implemented quickly, can be measured easily, and will ultimately transform the way students learn.

REFERENCES

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