Teaching the Media Child
in the Digital Swarm

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Kay Hymowitz's eulogy of childhood triggers my primordial father gene. I want to grab my three kids, bundle them into the minivan, and set out for some remote, unwired Alaskan valley. I know firsthand what Hymowitz describes. I've been to birthday parties where the seven-year-old birthday girl has unwrapped a box and pulled out a sheer nightdress that would make Victoria blush. I've seen my own children mesmerized by Pokemon and hypnotized by almost any Disney film that flits across the television.

But while my viscera may urge me to pack the minivan, the reality of our lives as parents, community members, and educators is that we will continue to live amid a torrent of media images. We may long to escape, but, "Ready or Not," our daily lives have become mediated by a digital swarm. That digital swarm is not a neutral force according to Hymowitz. It is a force unleashed by marketers and corporate interests to capitalize on our children, who have been left vulnerable by the diminished structure of the modern family. Our children are aromatic honey to this swarm since they long ago ceased to be future consumers who must be inculcated with the culture of consumerism. Today they are increasingly autonomous consumers themselves and influencers of their parents' purchases.

The consequence of this strategic program is what Hymowitz laments as the "deconstruction of childhood" and the reconstruction "of a new breed" of child that she calls "the media child," and that David Rushkoff calls the "screenager."

Yet for all the examples that I see of strutting, sashaying six-year-olds, I am not despondent. The same media have contributed to a meteoric rise in the number of our youth who volunteer and perform community service. The same media so lathered up our "tweeners" on reading that they swarmed to bookstores in the middle of the night to lug *Harry Potter* home and then consume a seven-hundred-page novel. So although I'm alarmed, I'm also enthusiastic about the prospects and find the editors' query important: What does the impact of commercial, media, and cyber culture mean for the role of the arts and creativity in education?

First, we need to ask ourselves a fundamental question: Why are the young so attracted to and enamored by media? Why, when the television flicks on, do children gravitate to the screen like moths? I think the answer is simple: they are entertained. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines entertainment as "the action of occupying a person's attention agreeably; amusement." Children enjoy television, video games, surfing the Web, and many other activi-

ties that trouble Hymowitz. Our children, particularly our adolescents, have more activities and devices to occupy their attention agreeably than any other generation in the history of civilization. That is true in almost every facet of their lives except for their schooling.

Schooling, as it occurs in most American classrooms, does not strive to overtly occupy our children's attention agreeably. The activities and methods are designed, with rare exceptions, to transmit information according to fairly rigid scripts. Although many would argue that schools should not be in the business of entertaining our children, we should not be surprised when our media savvy youth do not behave like pliant cherubs when faced with the tedious routines of school. Should we be shocked when our youth describe their experience in the classroom as dreary, dispiriting, and boring?

No. We shouldn't be surprised. As a high school honors student participating in a research study that I conducted noted, "I come to class, sit down and I want my teacher make it exciting. That's their [sic] job. The best teachers amuse me and make it fast and exciting." Not only are they accustomed to being entertained, but also, as sharp-fingered remote controllers, they're used to being able to blithely click away the talking head on the screen. Our inabili-

ty to agreeably hold the attention of today's students might be headlined as "MTV Trumps ABCs."

So what should we do? I believe the dominant response in the educational system has been to stiffen the incentives and give the enterprise some teeth. The thinking is that if we raise standards, test frequently, and up the ante on performance, then we will convince students to persevere with learning even if it is not entertaining. I believe that this is a flawed approach that will deplete teachers and diminish students.

A second approach focuses on the educative benefits of engaging our youth in agreeable experiences. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argues, "The task of education is one of socializing through seduction. The success of the school depends on how effectively it can engage the students' minds toward its objectives. Can it generate interest, motivation, and focused attention?" (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984, 202). This approach pivots on the principle that if our youth are engaged, they will work harder, be persistent, see obstacles as opportunities rather than impediments, and continue to learn when not forced to do so to fulfill their intrinsic need to understand. Orchestrating entertaining and interesting experiences for our youth should not be misunderstood as the end; learning and achievement are the end.

The marketers and advertisers understand how to seduce our children. They spend a fortune trying to discern the tastes, dispositions, and preferences of our youth. As Hymowitz points out, a whole category of corporate strategists has evolved to keep the commercial world attuned to the pulse of children: coolhunters. Hired by companies to inform advertisers and product designers of trends in youthdom, coolhunters are itinerant researchers who hang out in clubs, malls, and parks and look for trends in adolescent styles in clothes, music, and slang to be used in educating younger consumer "trainees." The prey of these hunters is whatever fascinates and intrigues our youth. The marketers take this information and translate it into products that engross our children.

Education needs coolhunters. We need to plumb our school settings and our youth to understand what it will take to engage them. If we don't, it's click, click, click!

How do we get our youth to stay tuned to our channel, while still providing an effective educational and academic benefit? I emphasize effective educational benefits because the danger in the contest for the attention of our youth is to seek to titillate and entertain by diverting the focus of learning. In considering how to face the challenge of educating our wired youth, I pose four directions for us to focus our attention.

First, we need to know our clientele better. Education needs a coolhunter orientation in which we persist in trying to understand the culture and capacity of our clients. Although this seems obvious, our educational professional development is typically devoted to learning new methods and practices, not reflecting on the aptitudes and culture of our students. We must devote time to understanding what Hymowitz calls this "new breed of children." The need to know our students well might even extend beyond our ability to know kid culture. Some researchers suggest that the integration of technology and media into the vicissitudes of our lives has led to physiological changes in brain structure. In *Endangered Minds,* Jane Healy presents an argument buttressed by research on neural plasticity that when "children's experience changes significantly, so will their brains. Part of the brain's physical structure comes from the way it is used" (Healy 1991, 15).

Second, if we are to seriously compete against the commercial culture and video games for the minds and attention of our youth, then we need to create vital experiences in our classrooms. These experiences must be educational in that they contribute to the growth and development of our students, but they also must strive to be memorable. Experiences leave an imprint when students actively participate in the experience and secure insight from that experience. Educators must learn to design and stage these experiences, in which students become active players. Examples

of staged experiences include publishing Web e-zines, participating in mock trials, publishing arts and literary journals, and putting on plays. Sadly, most of these experiences are designed for special pull-out extracurricular events or relegated to boutique courses. The need to understand the pedagogy and structure of these staged experiences, a staple of good art education, will be a boon for the field.

Third, our youth have grown up with a joystick in one hand and a mouse in the other. Operating these tools has given them practice in reading multimedia, morphing images, displaying graphics, and controlling a virtual environment. This is a powerful strength that we need to support while advancing our own agenda for fostering creative and analytical thinkers. Our youth have emergent literacy in multiple mediums. The textual structure most familiar to many of them has become hypermedia and its combination of texts, images, sound and movement. Working within the hypertext environment presents an unprecedented opportunity to foster artistic creativity. Just imagine Leonardo Da Vinci at the keyboard. His notebooks were filled with sketches, mathematical equations, poetry, and other forms of representation. This expansive repertoire enabled him to communicate with immense depth and nuance. He used text to convey certain meanings and illustrations to display meanings that text couldn't convey. The ease and power of the computer allows us work more competently with modes of expression that include visual, kinesthetic, musical, and verbal forms. By combining these forms, we expand our ability to represent creatively what we know and feel.

My final challenge relates to a story that a driver education teacher that I observed told his students. He began class by describing a three-year-old who had been left in a car for a few minutes, climbed over the seats, turned the key, and drove the car.

He finished the story and asked, "What is the lesson?" A kid in the back raised his hand and said, "Anybody can drive." The teacher replied, "Close. Any

three-year-old can operate a car, but here you are going to learn how to drive."

Any child can operate the devices that transmit the media; the imperative is to provide our youth with the proficiencies to operate them with responsibility, insight, and judgment. Paul Gilster proposes that all students must develop a new essential literacy: "digital literacy." Digital literacy involves mastering a set of core competencies that include the ability to read, synthesize, evaluate, filter, critique, and make informed judgments about diverse forms of symbol systems including on-line content, art, film, video, television, and drama. Developing new curriculum and adapting our practices to prepare students to sort critically through the torrent of media messages may be the most effective antidote to Hymowitz's concerns.

Ultimately, all fundamental forms of literacy and numeracy are vital. The core quandary is not what or how we teach, but whether our youth agree to participate and engage with our best hopes for them. While we must advance the project of curriculum design, I still think we need to begin with a coolhunter.

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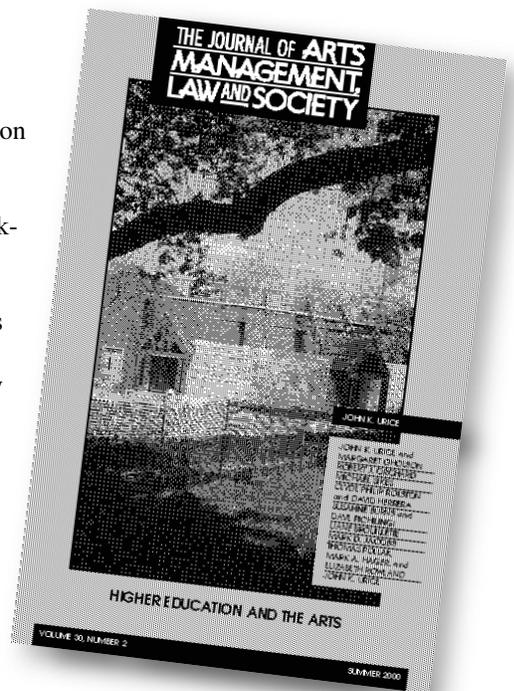
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