

WITH THIS ISSUE OF *EDUCATION CANADA*, WE WELCOME RUSHMORE KIDDER, AUTHOR OF A NEW DEPARTMENT EXPLORING ETHICAL DILEMMAS CONFRONTING EDUCATORS AND OTHERS TRYING TO BALANCE CONFLICTING VALUES IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

YouTube and the Silent Scream

At a recent Silicon Valley conference, I heard two predictions that fell together like tumblers in a lock. First, Hewlett-Packard CEO Mark Hurd pointed out that “only about two percent of the world’s data is digitized.” In other words, only a fraction of our knowledge is currently available on computers, DVDs, or iPods. That number will double in four years, he said, during which time there will be “more data created than in the history of the planet.”

The second came from Google vice-president Marissa Mayer, who noted that much of this information will be in data-heavy video formats. For her, the future lies in developing smaller, higher-capacity storage discs. By 2015, she prophesied, you’ll be able to “carry on an iPod more video than you can watch in a lifetime.”

These comments paint a heady future for today’s students. By 2015, many of them will have graduated from university. Then, iPods in hand, they’ll come thundering into a workforce awash with moving images. How will this newly dense video culture change their lives – and what should educators be doing to prepare them for this change?

Some of the impact will be positive. They’ll have access to troves of video information unavailable to today’s graduates – everything from sophisticated training manuals to classic Shakespeare performances. And when every cellphone call is a video conference, they’ll be more in touch with family and friends than any generation in history.

But what of the downside challenges? When all the world’s pornography fits on an iPod, its corrosive influence expands exponentially. And when everything you need to know to build a nuclear weapon is one click away in a visual format, the world becomes far more dangerous. These threats aren’t new; they existed in print as well. But within eight years they’ll be disseminated with unprecedented speed and appeal.

True, those threats arise from misuse. So let’s charitably suppose that, by 2015, all videos are created with a noble purpose. The downside then becomes the sheer glut of information. Even if every iPod user had an hour a

day for viewing, how would they know what to watch? Tomorrow’s students will most likely listen to their peers, either in person or through such sites as FriendFeed or Iminta, to tell them what everybody else is watching. Result? The video world quickly becomes elitist. The new social stratification will depend on whose friends recommend the most buzz-making stuff. The coolest kids will be the ones who spend the most time watching what those friends are watching, for fear of missing something vital.

What will that do to friendship? Will the world in 2015 plunge students into lonely, screen-staring vigils in place of face-to-face conversations with real people? That may already be happening. According to a 2008 *Norton Online Living Report*, one in three children say spending time with online friends is equal to, or preferable to, spending time with offline friends.

All of which raises the most profound ethical challenge of the coming video culture. Proponents of that culture tout it as a democratizing force, a great connector, a platform for egalitarian communication. Where every cellphone becomes a production studio (so the pitch goes), access to information will be democratized. In fact, it may have the opposite effect. Call it the silent scream, where the medium itself prevents those who use it from being heard. Like Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting “The Scream” – an iconic depiction of a desperate-looking, open-mouthed woman whose cry, by the very nature of oil on canvas, will never make a sound – the new video culture may actually be the medium that prevents communication.

Why? Because the central point of democracy isn’t that everyone gets to speak. It’s that others listen and that everyone’s voice matters. The grandly democratic promise of *YouTube* and its ilk – that they allow everyone’s work to be posted and shared – may end up burying each individual work under gigabytes of competing data, stifling the identity yearning for amplification, recognition, and response.

What should educators do? This is not a plea to turn back the clocks or shoot all the programmers. It’s a plea for compelling students to think seriously about the great moral ideas

of friendship, listening, access, and equality. As we dash to pack lifetimes of video onto credit-card-sized devices, we need to lead students into discourse about why we’re doing so. Suppose every iPod user had to answer that question before punching the ON button – had to contemplate the kind of world they were entering, the ethical problems they were apt to encounter, and some frameworks for addressing those problems. If we’re smart enough to compress a whole Blockbuster store into a few digital-processing centimeters, surely we’re smart enough to help our students mitigate the moral consequences of doing so.

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