A school with a view

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When I was in Grade 4, the best time at school was Friday afternoon when we headed to the Multi-Purpose Room to watch short films. From the entertaining to the downright bizarre, these sessions mark some of the most memorable times of primary school for me, and are perhaps responsible for my enduring love of cinema.

These simple days of relaxed afternoons with no obvious underlying educational motives seem long gone, and maybe rightly so. Children aged six to 13 now spend an average of 22.6 hours a week in front of a screen either watching TV or on the internet (2011, Roy Morgan Research). As "student engagement" rapidly becomes the buzz-phrase of the century, teachers are being urged to capitalise on students' interest in and facility with technology to ensure that school remains relevant and keeps pace with the changing world around it. But while in my childhood the screening of TV shows and films seemed unregulated, nowadays the use of media as a teaching tool, particularly in primary schools, often comes under close scrutiny.

The increasing parental voice in education, together with greater teacher accountability, has forced schools to actively consider the content and frequency of media used within their classes. At Our Lady Help of Christians where I teach, a concern raised by a parent about the appropriateness of showing part of a mainstream movie during school hours prompted us to draft a viewing policy. The process raised a swathe of questions that we had not previously given serious thought to.

Copyright of non print materials was one such issue. This was raised by a teacher who noticed that the warning at the beginning of most feature films includes a sentence indicating that the movie should not be played in places such as oil rigs, prisons and schools. Were we breaching copyright if we played it to students? According to *Smartcopying: The Official Guide to Copyright Issues for Australian Schools and TAFE*, "Schools are allowed to perform copyright material in class under a free exception to the Copyright Act (Section 28)." (The term "perform" includes showing a film in its definition.) The exception only applies if certain criteria are met, in particular that the work is used, "in the course of education and is not for profit," and "the people in the audience or class are giving or receiving instruction…" It is important to note that the exception **does not** apply, "to playing films or sound recordings for non-teaching activities such as rainy day film screenings, bus trips or school camps." Alas, goodbye to the lazy Friday afternoon film screening!

The ready availability of viewing material from a wide variety of sources warrants profound consideration in the formulation of a school viewing policy. General release material does not pose too much of a challenge since the Australian Government's Classification Website offers clear advice on how its classifications should be used. For example, its *Information Sheet for Teachers* suggests that, "The G classification is suitable for everyone. However, some G classified films or computer games may contain content that is not of interest to your students," and that, "The impact of PG classified (parental guidance) films and computer games should be no higher than mild, but they may contain content that your students find confusing or upsetting. PG classified material is not recommended for viewing or playing by persons under 15 without guidance from guardians."

The Classification Board encourages schools to develop their own policies regarding what is shown at particular year levels based on the classifications. In our case, we decided that anytime a full feature-length movie is to be shown, parents need to be notified (rather than asked) in writing. G-rated movies do not need parental consent, while PG movies usually need permission, especially in the younger years. Many schools have developed their own approach to make administration of this aspect of school viewing easier. Enfield Public School, for instance, has a blanket permission note on its website that it asks parents to complete, giving consent for students to watch G or PG programs or movies throughout the year on the understanding that teachers have to get approval from the principal or assistant principal before screening.

The Western Australia Department of Education offers a policy on its website that outlines procedures to be followed when showing classified viewing materials. According to the *Use of non-print texts in schools* policy (WA Department of Education, 2011), "Teachers are not the parents or guardians, and as such, parents should be notified of a teacher's intent to use PG material in an educational program. Within a primary school context, parent permission should always be obtained prior to the use of each PG rated non print text." With regard to the M classification, it stipulates, "It is not against the law to show materials with this classification to younger students, however, such materials are more suited to mature audiences as they may contain stronger themes and scenes which require a mature perspective.

If all educational considerations have been made and it is deemed necessary to use M-rated materials with students under 15 years, parental or guardian permission is required."

But viewing today has moved far beyond movies and TV. One of the issues we found most difficult to articulate a stance on was the use of internet content. Unlike commercially produced material, a high proportion of internet material is unrated. This means that it is a matter of opinion as to whether a particular clip or excerpt is appropriate for students. During the course of our debates, we concluded that most printed materials are unrated, and yet we trust teachers to choose suitable books without question. It therefore seemed to be common sense to allow teachers to exercise the same good judgement when choosing unrated viewing materials. We did consider whether or not we needed to consult parents before showing internet material or shorter clips from movies, but concluded that

should be used. For instance, the policy requires teachers to spend time on developing viewing strategies including predicting, comparing and summarising, as well as skills such as navigating websites and critically evaluating sources and content. We also made it clear that, "Content will be related to the curriculum and its educational objectives," a condition that reduces the likelihood of what could be considered too much time being devoted to screen-based activities.

To effectively engage students in their learning, it is necessary to not only provide them with opportunities to watch and connect with multimodal texts, but also to create their own. Embedding this expectation is a final vital ingredient of an effective viewing policy. In creating their own non-print texts, students will be implementing all they have learned from critical evaluation of resources and materials, skills which they will need throughout school and beyond.

Writing a viewing policy might seem like yet another administrative task that schools have to complete, but for us, it offered a worthwhile opportunity to put our practices and beliefs under the microscope. We now have a shared understanding of our approach to the use of multimodal texts which has been ratified by the School Board, a better grasp of the legal implications of copyright issues and a workable document to which we can refer if we, or any parents, have questions about the suitability of materials. Whether or not you think children spend too much time in front of a screen already, videos and films are an integral part of our students' worlds. With the pace of technological change, it seems to make sense to take stock so that viewing materials can be incorporated into educational settings in a deliberate and considered way that best takes advantage of the possibilities they present.

References

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the logistics of getting permission every time a few minutes of content was screened would be untenable. We also discussed the fact that one of the wonders of having today's technology is that you can gain immediate access to visual resources to spontaneously support learning in the class. We felt it was important that our viewing policy acknowledged that while guidelines are necessary, they should not get in the way of a "teachable moment".

A potential unwanted side-effect of too stringent a viewing policy is a feeling that the professional judgement of teachers is being undermined, both in terms of the content selected and the amount of time devoted to viewing. Identifying a clear rationale and aims can help to lessen this perception, as it gives a base against which proposed activities can be evaluated. Our policy rationale, for example, states that, "Literacy now encompasses more than just the written word. Multimodal texts are now integral parts of our society... With the pace of change in our access to communication it is of growing importance that students can critique what is seen and experienced." Our policy also accepts that, "While printed texts remain important, students will engage with forms of text other than written, using a variety of technologies." This leaves no doubt about the role of viewing resources in our school, and sets an expectation that students will and should be exposed to stimulus such as videos, photographs and short films.

We decided not to set a specific limit on the amount of time that viewing materials should or can be incorporated into class programs, as the variables were too numerous to account for; topics being studied, teacher preferences, student interest and availability of appropriate materials all influence how multimodal texts are used in the classroom. We did, however, set some broad expectations about how viewing materials