

MTV

On Christmas Day I read the Asheville Citizen-Times. I'm sure many of the faculty missed that edition, and even if you read the paper, you might have overlooked the "Generation X" column written by Jennifer Weiner, a student at Penn State. Here are some excerpts:

"The 1993 Yankelovich Monitor found that among the 60 percent of the nation's households with cable, 62 percent of all 16 to 29 year olds watch MTV regularly.

Among the same group, only 4 percent are reading weekly news magazines regularly, and MTV beats out the networks' evening newscasts by 3 to 1.

Translated, these numbers mean that the average twentysomething in a cable-equipped house is finding out what matters in the world not from starchy white guys behind desks, but in five-minute chunks between the latest offerings from Pearl Jam and Prince. Off Jennings, off Rather, off Newsweek, and Time! (To say nothing of daily newspapers, which probably raised not a blip on the Yankelovich radar). We want our MTV!

To read a newsmagazine at twentysomething is to leaf through a catalogue of irrelevancies.

There has to be more: more information about the lives and times of the under-thirties, more information presented in a way that spells out how it matters to us. More borrowing of the techniques that work on MTV: shorter, topical pieces, younger, more diverse commentators with better clothes and better hair. If these strategies lured twentysomethings into the house of Madonna, they just might bring us back out."

In the same December 25 edition was an article headlined "Partying Questioned as Campus Debates whether Duke is Intellectual Enough." In this article Reynolds Price, professor of English, is quoted as lambasting students for their "blank faces" in class. Price apparently believes fraternities and the lack of coed dorms at Duke are the cause. Others believe a more demanding curriculum is the answer. The Rev. Willmon, dean of Duke Chapel, says, "most Duke undergraduates seem to believe the university is merely a step on the way to law school, a necessary evil to be endured before Wall Street."

Of course Western Carolina is not Duke, and few of our students envision a career in law or on Wall Street--but they probably seek analogous "futures." Similarly, I doubt there are any significant differences in MTV-watching between students at Western, Duke, and Penn State.

What does all this mean for teachers at WCU? Can we compete with MTV? Should we try? If we are in some kind of "competition" with MTV, how can we win when network TV and national newsmagazines are already "losers"? The students probably see us and MTV as two different things--MTV is amusing and interesting and we aren't. But I teach cultural geography and get mostly "blank faces" in class when I ask students where Bosnia is and what is the cultural basis for the war. Most of them don't know and, furthermore, couldn't care less. I don't get much more response when I bring up the subject of Somalia--a place where the USA is militarily involved.

It's not all students, of course. This problem of "blank faces," ignorance, and apathy is most pronounced in general education courses. In my upper-division courses (about one a semester) the ratio of "blank faces" to "interested faces" is reversed. But in general education courses there are just so many who couldn't care less about what we are doing, and this poses a real problem for faculty who spend most of their time teaching courses that many students think are "irrelevant" to their goals in life. I am inclined to believe that there's a certain group of students who are going to be interested, whatever we do, and perhaps another group that we won't be able to reach, whatever we do. But I also believe there may be a large group in the middle that we may be able to reach if we do the right things. But what can we do? One thing I have been able to come up with so far is to try to find interesting, out-of-class assignments for my students.

For example, I have had some success in my Geography 103 course with a research assignment that asks each student to write a research paper on a country that I assign at random. The student reports on the dominant culture and one minority culture in the country, discussing how the two groups get along. The students seem more interested in this assignment than in lectures and text readings and do better than they do on tests. Perhaps when we lecture too much we are entering into a direct competition with MTV and other commercial entertainment media, a competition we cannot hope to win. Perhaps we need to do something different. But what is it? Perhaps we need smaller classes. But is that feasible? Perhaps we need more discussion and more writing and fewer tests. But can we do that with large classes? I have more questions than answers and no easy solutions, so I invite comments. Also, if you want the complete articles I quoted from, I can provide copies.

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Comments or Questions?

If you have comments you would like to make about this essay or questions you would like to ask Ralph, please send them by the 8th of the month to Terry Nienhuis (FCTE; phone: 7196; Vax: TNienhuis). Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.