

## *Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

Response to "MTV" by Ralph Triplette, 3/1/94

A little over a year ago I was passing through the University Center on my way to a class and I saw a young man sitting alone watching a typical sitcom on one of the UC televisions. As I entered the room, he belted out a laugh in response to some joke I did not hear. I was immediately curious about how this individual could laugh so loud at any sitcom joke. Whenever I watch those programs with their four-laughs-a-minute "jokes" I begin to feel uneasy at my apparent lack of humor because I never laugh as heartily as those audience participants on the laugh track. Sometimes I might exert a smile or two but very rarely do I experience a laugh. Instead, I experience annoyance that the sitcom laugh track is trying to convince me that the program is funny and wonderful when I know it is not.

Now that my attention was focused on that student I saw him laugh again along with the sitcom laugh track. Still curious, I found a seat in the room where I could view him for a few minutes without him being aware of me. In the five minutes that I watched him, I saw him laugh at every situation. He sometimes laughed with the audience and sometimes a fraction of a second before them. He always seemed to know when to laugh. But the most disturbing thing about this whole episode was that this young man laughed without emotion, without humor, if one can envision such a laugh. Then, as though he had a script of the show, he would cut off his laugh at the exact moment one of the characters was supposed to speak. No lingering smile remained on his face. He reassumed the same poker-faced stare his face had displayed just before the joke.

OK, so this was one guy, one weird-responding human. But I began to think, "is it catching?" "Could others be made to become human laugh tracks?" Or worse, "is TV watching so mind numbing and hypnotic that it turns some susceptible individuals into corporate-controlled zombies?" Is it possible that TV will turn out to be the technological nightmare that a growing number of opponents say it will be? I am not in

a position to predict such a disaster, but this incident has remained to haunt me whenever I read about the negative aspects of TV watching.

**Andrew A. LaTorre, Industrial & Engineering Technology**

To a certain extent, I agree with the newspaper article cited by Ralph Triplette which said if we want to lure the younger generation out of the house of Madonna we will have to have better clothes, better hair, and more topical pieces presented in slicker segments that match more closely the current 18 to 21 year old's MTV addict's attention span. If we do nothing but stand before our classes and lecture, we invite the competition of MTV and will suffer from the very disadvantages alluded to in the article that Ralph cites. However, if we involve our students in the learning process rather than simply throwing facts at them, we have an unbeatable advantage over all media currently available to them, including Madonna in her underwear. We appear in living, breathing color, and we have interactive capabilities that MTV, at least currently, cannot possibly compete with. And this is the difference we must use to our advantage. If we involve our students in the learning process we can make our classes both exciting and fun in a way that no television screen ever can. Of course, most of us already do this, even though it is considerably more work than straight lecture, and we all have class sizes that make it quite difficult, but we need to realize that this is the edge we have that current media stars cannot match; we are LIVE and the students are DIRECTLY INVOLVED! All this may not lure students to watch Dan Rather or Jim Lehrer when they watch t.v., but it will allow us to accomplish our goals in our classes; and maybe our interest in and enthusiasm for boring, starchy media, whether electronic or in print, will spill over and we can accomplish both our job and Dan Rather's in the course of our classroom work.

**Bill Hyatt, Criminal Justice**

# Responses to "MTV"

continued

I have read the articles that Ralph cites and it seems to me that Ralph is correct in just about everything he has said. Furthermore, I think his effort to create more interesting and relevant assignments is good, and I agree about that middle group of students that we can reach if we create the right set of experiences.

**Dale Carpenter, Human Services**

As Ralph Triplette's Faculty Forum article spoke of problems in our general education courses, he got me thinking about a recent experience I had as a student rather than as a teacher. One "joy" of parenthood is getting to revisit your general education as you help your children with their homework. My older daughter, a high school junior, struggled through her first semester of chemistry, so I volunteered to take the next course with her on a day-to-day basis.

Each day she tells me what she was supposed to learn, I read the textbook, and then I work problems with her. In my naivete, I thought someone who scored in the 99th percentile on the GRE and actually survived a full year of college organic chemistry would find this an easy task. Instead, I find myself spending many hours trying to figure out what is going on. One problem is the textbook. It is written from the "discipline" point of view, by insiders, for insiders. Over-arching concepts and meanings are rarely mentioned. Another problem is that there is no effort to provide the bigger picture of the scientific enterprise.

My daughter will leave this course with little knowledge that she will ever use. Perhaps more important, she will leave the course with no appreciation of what science is about, no feeling for why educated citizens who are not scientists should support science, no curiosity about the role of chemistry in particular or science in general in the natural world, and no desire to read about the findings of science. Instead, she will leave the course with a negative attitude about science and science courses. I am trying to attenuate these effects, but too often I am struggling to see the bigger picture myself. Worse yet, I find myself thinking, though not

uttering, the very notion that I hate to hear from my own students: "why does anyone need to learn this?" I don't blame her teacher for this. The problem is systemic.

I have to wonder how much our own general education program suffers from the same malady. Are we losing our students by getting them lost in the details of our disciplines instead of stimulating curiosity and creating a culture of truly general education? Are we assuming that what general education students need to know is what we know in our disciplines? Or, do we need to completely rethink how we present the findings from our disciplines to non-specialists? In theory, our general education courses were supposed to be independent of "major" requirements. But has the content of the general education courses been moved to the level of the "bigger picture"? Moreover, have we created an intellectual climate in which reading, writing, and thinking have become the normative activities of the WCU campus? As Ralph asks, can we do this in large classes? Perhaps the most disconcerting thought of all: I have two more children who have yet to enter high school!

**Anonymous**