

OUR “HAPPY FEET” PREDICAMENT

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Our Grade K-6 students anxiously awaited their field trip to the IMAX to view the Academy Award-nominated, 2006 Australian-produced computer-animated movie, “Happy Feet”. The movie seemingly contains an environmental message, although much of its storyline is based on a misfit penguin struggling to find acceptance. For some students, the viewing experience would have been the celebration for completing their study of the life-cycle of penguins.

Then unexpectedly, it happened—one parent expressed strong concern about their child going to view “Happy Feet” and declined to have their child attend. This was no doubt due to the mostly unfavorable reviews given on the Internet by a number of popular Christian movie review websites. This contradicted previous information given to us by our booking attendant that the movie was rated ‘G’.

How were we to deal with the issue? After all, the concern of the parent was legitimate. Among the myriad of questions raised were: Should the event be cancelled much to the disappointment of the other students? Would cancelling the event deny these students of a valuable learning experience?

What if we just went ahead with the trip and respected the right of the offended parent not to send their child to school on the day of the event? Then again, did we not have a responsibility to ensure that the children of our other consenting parents would not be impacted in some way?

Could the issue divide the staff, some of whom felt that we would have gone ahead and attended anyways had “the concern” not come to our attention? Furthermore, would it be hypocritical to cancel viewing “Happy Feet” whose rating pales insignificance to other Walt Disney films? Features such as *A Bug’s Life*, *Aladdin*, *Hercules* and *the Hunchback of Notre Dame* though highly popular; rank among the most violent. Those of us Adventist educators who are in-tune with the daily conversations of our students know full well the extent to which many aspects of popular culture has extended its tentacles into Adventist homes, the church and our schools.

Our “Happy Feet” experience caused our school to re-evaluate its values. Whatever the outcome, it was imperative that we made the right decision. As our society becomes saturated with technology, it is necessary that our schools safeguard the hedges by selecting appropriately from the vast array of available media. Regardless of the pre-existing viewing habits of children and what their parents may tolerate, our schools must continue to embrace a high standard. After all, part of every Christian teacher’s goal is to educate morally balanced learners for the future.

In this article, media technology primarily refers to computer technology and its related audio-visual and multi-media components. Technology no doubt plays an increasingly vital role in the life of Seventh-day Adventist students. The benefits which technology has for teaching and learning are well documented (Wright and Shade, 1994). Its growth has been exponential. In light of such growth, Adventist educators have a responsibility to understand technology’s potential impact on learners and be prepared to use it appropriately.

Technology has the power to influence children’s learning and development. It is important that we strive to eliminate those concerns, which would negatively impact them. These points of concern include, but are not limited to:

- stereotyping of cultural groups
- pornography, nudity, overt and covert sexual scenes, promiscuity, homosexual preferences
- occult, witchcraft, voodoo, black-magic, psychic
- exposure to violence—as a means of solving problems, blood and gore, horror
- disrespect for authority
- anti-God
- glorification of villains
- pointless value
- exposure to profanity

In retrospect, our school’s decision to cancel our booking to view “Happy Feet” was the right one. When in doubt it is better to err on the side of caution. Adventist teachers have been entrusted with the awesome responsibility of molding children both for now and eternity. We, therefore, have a temporal and divine obligation to protect them from harmful media-- regardless of how miniscule the rating might be.

“Happy Feet” was rated 3:4:1 in the order to sex/nudity, violence/gore and profanity. Can anyone accurately predict the precise combination among the three that might be acceptable for any child? Co-author, Fumie Yakota concludes that it is not clear how children incorporate a video image into their thinking. Clearly, we need to take a critical approach to the evaluation of any technological media we might use in our schools. Case in point, when we consulted with booking staff, we were erroneously informed that the movie was rated ‘G’ even though the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) gave it a rating of ‘PG’, as did several other popular movie rating sites.

Since its’ inception in 1968, the MPAA has set the rating standard for the movie viewing industry and for the most part educational institutions across North America. Nonetheless, what do all those letters and numbers—‘G’, ‘PG’, ‘PG-13’, ‘R’ and ‘NC-17’—mean?

A ‘G’ rated movie means that the movie is approved for all audiences including pre-schoolers and high school aged children.

The rating ‘PG’ (Parental Guidance) means that some of the contents of the movie may not be appropriate for younger children and may even frighten or upset them. Parents should watch the movie with their child.

The rating ‘PG-13’ means that some of the contents of the movie may not be appropriate for children 13 years of age and under and that parents should watch the movie with their children.

The ‘R’ rating means that the movie is restricted and that no one less than 17 years old should see the movie without a parent.

'NC-17' means that a movie is not appropriate for children under the age of 17, even if they have a parent's permission to view it. These should not be seen by students.

Interestingly, a 2000 Harvard research project cautions us to be leery of the 'G' rating, pointing out that the greatest amounts of violence in G-rated films was found in those films released during the past ten years, suggesting that industry ratings are becoming increasingly lax.

Today's students are growing up highly exposed to an array of technology media other than movies and film. The Internet, software, audio-cassettes, CD's/DVD's, MP3'S, IPod's, Nintendo GameCube, Microsoft Xbox and Playstation are among our fiercest competitors, as we battle to stimulate and harness student engagement in the classroom.

It comes as no surprise, that unless prohibited, students will log on to Microsoft Messenger at their computer workstation to communicate with friends even though they have an assignment to complete.

This multi-tasking AVGG (Audiovisual Gobbling Generation) can be found in many of our schools. How this generation is taught to use the technology has implications for the future. Furthermore, every Adventist Educator need to ensure that students in their care are not being exposed to media which are mainly for entertainment and which lack authorization.

Adventist Teachers who have clarified their reason for using a particular type of technology with their students have taken an important positive first step. If our reasons are, however, mainly to celebrate the end of term or end of unit point of study, we might have our own "Happy Feet" predicament. It is commendable to observe our teachers offering appropriate rewards other than a movie or a piece of software for good behavior or for paying attention in class.

It can be a daunting challenge for those smaller-sized schools which do not have the luxury of a trained media center specialist or librarian. It is not uncommon in these settings, to find a teacher or a principal working in isolation to make decisions about acquisition, appraisal, selection and use of audiovisual technology. This is often in addition to their already taxing workload.

Decision making regarding audio-visual technology in school should not be made in such isolation nor should its approach be hit and miss. School leaders working in tandem with their School Board and other stakeholders, must seek to articulate a policy on acquisition, selection appraisal and use of technology media. This should be followed with systematic implementation of policy guidelines deemed acceptable to the school community.

Whether or not such policy guidelines are in place, the teacher practitioner is encouraged to give further critical assessment of the technology medium he or she intends to use. He or she might raise a few, if not all the following questions:

1. Does the technology I intend to use promote the values and ideals of Seventh-day Adventist Education as supported by Seventh-day Adventist parents?
2. Can I clearly articulate my school's policy guidelines for the acquisition, selection, appraisal and use of the technology?
3. Does the technology I intend to use promote Biblical values?
4. Does the technology promote healthy moral relationships?

5. Is there a redeeming value in the use of the technology?
6. Is there an educational value and could I use an alternative medium to provide similar or greater value to the students?
7. Is the technology relevant to the curriculum being studied by my students?
8. Is the technology appropriate for the age and maturity level of my students?
9. Can I detect a clear distinction between good and evil?
10. Is there value placed on human life?

Teaching our students to become critical thinkers, viewers and users of technology is also an important facet of technology education in our schools. As critical thinkers, student will need to be taught how to “read” technology, in order to detect visual subtlety, symbolism and beauty.

Recognizing and appreciating what is tasteful provides a tool for telling the difference between what is ‘good’ and what is ‘trash’. (Hopkins, Babikian, McBride and Oliver, 2003) “...we need to teach our young people how to examine and understand the effects of media. With some guidance, even elementary-level students can develop critical viewing skills”.

Our “Happy Feet” experience was worthwhile. It reminded us that we need to make time and effort to assess critically the various media technology we utilize in our school. Ironically, it is reassuring to know that we can use the same technologies to our advantage—to filter out that which is unacceptable.

Like Mumble (“Happy Feet”), the protagonist in the film, Christians who choose carefully to monitor what they and their child see and hear may be viewed as ‘different’, maybe even odd. Nonetheless The Bible tells us that “by beholding we become changed,”. In the wake of heightened media exposure, the only changes required in our lives and the lives of our children, are those that refit us for our heavenly home to come.

While as busy educators we might not have the time to assess critically every medium of technology, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians we possess a quick and infallible scale for detecting the objectionable. This ‘T’, ‘N’, ‘R’, ‘P,’ ‘L’, ‘A’ rating scale is based on Philippians 4:8 (NIV) “*Finally, brothers, whatever is True, whatever is Noble, whatever is Right, whatever is Pure, whatever is Lovely, whatever is Admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*”

Resources:

- Hopkins, G., Babikian, T., McBride, D. & Oliver, Anita. . 2003. “Media Messages: How Do They Affect Our Youth? [Electronic version]. Adventist Review. Retrieved January 10, 2007 from <http://www.adventistreview.org/2003-1510/story5.html>
- NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children). 1994. Technology and Young Children—Ages through 8.
- Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. 2001. Retrieved on December 30, 2006 from <http://www.nwrel.org/request/june01/inequities.html>

- Steffenhagen, Janet. May, 2006. "Educators put videos to test: Team of teachers to choose movies suitable for screening in B.C. classroom. Vancouver Sun, p. 9.
- The Washington Post. 2000. 'G' isn't always 'good' for kids. Retrieved on January 14, 2007 from www.media-awareness.ca.

Other Helpful Links:

- <http://www.filmratings.com/guide.htm>
- <http://www.parentreviews.com/>
- <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/>
- <http://www.kids-in-mind.com/>