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ABSTRACT

The packaging of history, science, and most other classroom subjects lack the excitement for students that the stylish, artful presentation of items on television and in magazines contain. The world is more distracting outside of the classroom than earlier in the century, yet the instructional materials have changed little over the decades. The presentation of the basic tenets of civilization needs to be just as stylish as the methods for pushing the latest consumer fancy. The results of doing otherwise exist around the country with much of a whole generation left with the sense that education is a separate, boring realm. An example of these changes is GTV, a product of National Geographic Society that could have a lasting impact on young people. Like MTV, GTV has developed a certain style, a sense of humor, and a beat. Creation of classroom materials involves taking the best techniques of commercial television and of music video and applying them to issues that matter for more than a moment. (CK)

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Seduce Your Children

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## Seduce Your Children

Madonna. Coca-Cola. Nike. The things we care about most as a society. Or so it seems, given the stylish, artful presentation they get on television, in magazines—everywhere we turn.

On the other hand... Thomas Jefferson. DNA. Martin Luther King, Jr. Not much fun, really. Certainly unworthy of the time and telegenic skill we spend on pushing Budweiser or Honda.

Or so it seems—especially to our young people. In this age of Indiana Jones and MTV, the leaden way we present the fundamental values of our society... well, given the competition, those vital lessons don't exactly set the world on fire.

In fact, the way we package history and science and most every other classroom subject—the way we present these ideas is so backward, so boneheaded, so downright boring that learning barely has a chance.

Think back, for example, to your first encounter with the Constitution. It probably began with a tidy, formal textbook lesson. Which probably worked just fine. After all, if you grew up during the Eisenhower Presidency—or in any era when television was still just black-and-white—even a textbook could be fascinating.

Since then, the world outside the classroom has gotten a lot more distracting. Young people, once largely ignored by all but their parents, now represent a prime market; they are the focus of a media-rich blitz that never ends.

Yet the materials we use for teaching have changed precious little over the decades. Today's textbooks have more pictures, sure. Video abounds, though the creators of most educational programs don't appear to be too well-acquainted with the virtues of humor, music, or brevity. And, whatever the medium, those long-entrenched forces of educational homogenization still tend to render the message toothless; as in days of yore, there's not much bite in print or audiovisual programs for today's classrooms.

So imagine what goes on in our schools right now: The same lesson that worked fairly well in the quieter times of your youth runs smack up against MTV. Those stale old textbook paragraphs now have the task of capturing the adolescent minds of 1990—which, if typical, are fairly drunk with the grace of Michael Jordan, absolutely rocking with glee over the frankness of Bart Simpson.

You can forget that lesson about the Constitution—it ain't gonna fly.

Worse, the sheer, stupefying dullness of most classroom materials makes kids regard everything associated with learning as oddly out-of-it. Irrelevant. Backward. Because school feels less like the heady media mix of contemporary American life and a lot more like, say, Bulgaria in 1952.

So that lack of style is sending our kids a powerful message: We don't really care about the Constitution. Or DNA. At least, we don't care enough to make the programs that attempt to teach these lessons anywhere near so interesting as ads for, oh, bottled water.

And don't fool yourself—this sabotaging of the educational mission may be unintentional, but it's unbelievably effective. Kids miss a lot, but hypocrisy (of the dull and pious variety) rarely escapes them. So no matter what we say to the contrary, the energy and verve we lavish on commercial messages casts a sharp—and unflattering—light on the flat-footed style of conventional educational programs.

For instance: In any media face-off between two Jacksons—Andrew and Michael—you can bet big money that you won't find a single educational video that gives Old Hickory a fighting chance.

It's this way in school day after day—lackluster classroom materials come up against the steamy glamour of advertising, of music videos. Is it any wonder that consumer goods—wanting and buying—win out just about every time? Every time kids think about what should matter to them in their own lives. About where they should invest their own spark and spirit.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with pulling out all the stops to peddle a truly fine pair of running shoes. But it's not inconceivable that we might pitch the Bill of Rights just as hard, just as winningly. That is—given the competition for the attention of our young people—the time has come to make the way we present the basic tenets of our civilization just as stylish as our methods for pushing the latest (but decidedly passing) consumer fancy.

The results of doing otherwise—of failing to make classroom materials face up to that competitive challenge—are all around us. There's a new crop every year—kids unacquainted with science and its miracles, unaware of the lessons of history, unburdened by the fundamental values of our society. Much of a whole generation—and a shamefully big share of an entire race—all are left with the sense that education is a separate, dusty realm. A place no adult would ever visit voluntarily. A trap, a backwater—where escape is the only enticing prospect.

What this leads to, of course, is kids who see little value in learning. Who have no sense that the world of ideas has anything to offer. Or that school has any meaning-

ful connection with their world. Kids who've seen little effort by society to invite them in, to include them in the discussion of its most cherished values.

Of course, making the materials we use to teach more glamorous—more vivid, varied, more truly engaging—won't solve every educational challenge we face. But it's a vital step—no matter what the student's upbringing, no matter how rich or poor the school.

Because the whole idea is to get the conversation started. In a word, to seduce. And, for a change, to use the art of seduction to suggest a greater world beyond... well, beyond shopping.

It's time to make the classroom competitive. After all, the very best teachers are gifted performers. Now, let's give them the necessary props. Together, let's try to make sure that school isn't the only place in this society where—outside of jail—we expect our young people to undergo prolonged sensory deprivation.

We do have to up the ante. Enrich the mix. Do handstands. Whatever it takes—to send our kids a message about what really matters.

Happily, this effort has already begun. At the National Geographic Society, of all places. Yes, the good, gray Geographic—finally, this old hand at old-style education has taken an entirely new direction in the classroom. It's called GTV, and it brings real energy and power into school. GTV can be about history or science or even economics. But, like MTV, it always has a beat. A sense of humor. A certain style. And it could have lasting impact on the young people of today.

What can you do? You can find out more about GTV, about what it is and how it works. You could help get GTV into schools. Perhaps most important, you might play a role in making more GTV. Or in creating other classroom materials that—like GTV—take the best techniques of commercial television, the best of music video, and apply them to issues that matter for more than a moment.

We need all the help we can get. And time's a wastin'.