Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Non-optimal uses of video in the classroom

Renee Hobbs*

Temple University, Philadelphia, USA

This paper examines some instructional practices concerning the non-optimal uses of video, films and other mass media in the K–12 classroom. Based on a six-year process of observing and interviewing teachers regularly in two school districts in Massachusetts, USA, this paper presents a typology of seven common patterns of non-optimal media use, instructional practices that diminish or weaken the value of film and video viewing as a learning tool. A telephone survey was conducted with a purposive sample of 130 middle-school and high-school teachers to provide additional evidence concerning teacher perceptions of the frequency of their colleagues' non-optimal use of video. Teachers in the USA report that their colleagues frequently use media for non-educational purposes, including to fill time, to keep students quiet, as a break from learning, or as a reward for good behavior. The implications of non-optimal media use are considered in light of renewed interest in integrating media literacy into K–12 instruction.

Introduction

In the spring of 2004, the Washington DC public schools faced public embarrassment when a sixth-grade teacher screened the bloody R-rated Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*, in the classroom (Blum, 2004). Such practices have 'man-bites-dog' characteristics that garner brief media attention based on shock value. Of course, most American teachers do not make such poor choices. But teachers do sometimes use film, television and videotape materials for reasons that are not directly related to knowledge acquisition or skills development. In some schools in the USA, the practice of using videotape as a substitute teacher or time-filler are so common that they have become normalized by routine practice and are considered ordinary and appropriate.

*Department of Broadcasting, Telecommunications and Mass Media, School of Communications and Theater, Temple University, 320 Annenberg Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA. Email: renee.hobbs@temple.edu

In one middle-school classroom, a teacher showed a videotape every Friday. According to the school's media specialist, the teacher let students 'vote' on the videotape they wanted to watch, and students even brought in rental videotapes of feature films to screen in the classroom. In another school, when parents complained to school administrators when an elementary school teacher showed children's cartoons (rented from the nearby video store) each week in the classroom, the superintendent defended the teacher, noting that, in particular, the *Frosty the Snowman* cartoon had educational value because students were learning about the weather (Hobbs, 1994). The frequency and increasing visibility of these types of misuses of television and videotape in the classroom may sour parents and school administrators on the genuine educational value of television and video texts as learning tools.

Children grow up in a culture where most of their information and entertainment comes through the mass media, and teachers can promote the development of critical thinking skills by using television and video materials as texts to be interrogated and analyzed (Buckingham, 2003). Media literacy skills can be developed by asking critical questions about media messages, comparing newspapers to TV news, analyzing patterns of representation in documentaries, or studying television and film adaptations of literature (Aufderheide, 1993; Hobbs, 1996). But these practices might be misunderstood or unappreciated if large numbers of teachers use videotapes or other mass media resources to fill time, as a reward for good behavior, or as a substitute teacher.

Video usage is ubiquitous in American schools

Ever since the first school filmstrips of the 1920s, non-fiction and documentary films and other audio-visual programs have become part of the fabric of American school culture (Cuban, 1986). Most teachers use documentaries, TV shows, or fictional films as 'enrichment'—to enhance their coverage of subject areas, particularly language arts, social studies, history, science and geography (Weller & Burcham, 1990). Teachers make use of video and films in the classroom because these materials can help explore cultural context, are easy to integrate into the curriculum, and allow flexibility of materials and teaching techniques (Aiex, 1999). TV and video are also perceived by teachers as especially effective for reaching visual learners and special populations (Study of School Uses of Television and Video, 1997).

K–12 teachers can be reflective and thoughtful in selecting appropriate films and videos for classroom use, using these materials to motivate student interest, to reinforce student learning, to illustrate ideas, concepts and principles, to stimulate discussion, or to promote textual analysis skills and critical thinking. When television, video and other media are used with dynamic and vigorous interaction and engagement between students and teacher, significant learning experiences can result. For example, a collaborative project between WNET and Texaco Teacher Training Institute for Science, Television and Technology involved training teachers in how to use television technology interactively in science classes. According to researcher Ruth Ann Burns, who examined the effectiveness of the program, when television is

used interactively as a component of middle-school science classes, students' 'writing is more creative and descriptive, and [students] displayed more ingenuity and innovation on assignments, and they were more confident and enthusiastic in class' (Burns, 1993, p. 4).

However, while teachers recognize the power of the video, film and visual media as effective tools which aid the process of instruction, they often view the presentation and format of school-sanctioned media messages as unproblematic, as Masterman has noted:

> [A] major problem facing those who wish to develop the study of the media in schools is that one of their fundamental assumptions—that the media are signifying practices or symbolic systems which need to be actively read—flies in the face of many people's common sense understanding of the media as largely unproblematic purveyors of experience. (1985, p. 6)

Educators have long recognized that teaching with (and about) media and popular culture is simultaneously subversive and conservative because media texts create new opportunities for reaching students while reinforcing hierarchies that maintain the educational status quo (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1969; Buckingham, 2003). Without a critical perspective, media use in the classroom may replicate the ways that television, video and other electronic media are used in the home, as a passive form of recreation, amusement, or escape that is increasingly a dominant, normative dimension of contemporary leisure among young and old.

Educational policies shape selection of video content

Despite the glowing claims among academic literacy scholars about the potential of visual and electronic media to serve as twenty-first-century 'texts' for young learners (Flood *et al.*, 1997; Alvermann *et al.*, 1999), some teachers do make inappropriate choices in terms of the *content* of film and television programs used in the classroom. In the USA, school districts have adopted policies to minimize the possibility of parental disapproval and to encourage teachers to reflect carefully on their specific educational goals when using contemporary media forms in the classroom (Zirkel, 1999). Some districts have a 'controversial learning resources' policy that defined such materials as those 'not included in the approved learning resources of the district and which are subject to disagreement as to appropriateness because they relate to controversial issues or present material in a manner or context which is itself controversial' (Zirkel, 1999, p. 70).

However, research has not yet examined or evaluated the range of US district-level policies (and the actual levels of compliance) which define the appropriate uses of film, video, or popular media in the classroom. Some school districts have highly restrictive policies, as described by Stevens (2001), who reports that to use a clip from a PG-rated film with middle-school students, district policy required permission slips from all students' parents for the viewing of the clips. In other districts, teachers report that requirements may include: submitting video clips for classroom for principal's approval 20 days before screening; or providing copies of videos to be used

to a district-level administrator for approval at the beginning of each semester. In some schools, principals communicate their disapproval of district-level policies to their staff and do not require teachers to adhere to restrictive video-use policies, while in other communities principals establish and enforce even more stringent informal policies (including no use of videotape or popular music) than district-level policies proscribe.

While educational leaders have begun to explore questions concerning inappropriate *content* of video used in classrooms, there has been little scholarly inquiry concerning the *instructional methods* of using video in secondary classrooms, or about teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of various methods or approaches. Scholars have examined the factors that influence the use and impact of education television in school (see Forsslund, 1991 for review), but there is much less evidence on teachers' attitudes and behaviors concerning non-optimal uses of video. A survey of English teachers in the State of Minnesota revealed that video use is widespread, showing that most discussions about film in high-school English classrooms center around plot and character development, subject matter and theme, and issues of literary adaptation, but not film techniques, genres, or issues of representation (Larsson, 2001). This study indirectly identified potential non-optimal uses of video, in a question that asked teachers whether they had support from school administrators. Comments suggested that some Minnesota teachers were concerned about the misuse of audio-visual media, including: 'I think many teachers use film inappropriately,' 'Please don't use film as a "filler" or "entertainment,"' and 'I think any use of film should be embedded in the curriculum and not just "viewed."' This research attempts to provide qualitative and quantitative evidence to document observed and self-reported uses of video by K–12 teachers that may not fully enhance effective student learning.

Research methodology

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study examines the use of television, films, videos and other audio-visual or mass media materials in the classroom, with a particular focus on identifying instructional practices that are non-optimal, that is, those teacher behaviors that may diminish or limit the potential value of films and videos as tools to support active student learning.

Observations and interviews

Between 1993 and 1996, I worked as a staff development provider in a K–12 school district in Massachusetts in an effort to help the district integrate media literacy into the curriculum. The school district was located in a working-class community approximately 30 miles northwest of Boston, serving 6400 mostly Caucasian students in nine schools. Thirty-two teachers (12 elementary, 10 middle school, and 10 high school) were enrolled in a graduate program, which consisted of a series of seminar-style learning experiences, over three years, involving topics related to the intersection

of media studies, education, and technology. As part of their graduate coursework I observed 15 teachers in their classrooms. I also conducted interviews with these individuals, focusing on questions related to their educational aims, goals, and uses of media and technology in the classroom. Between 1997 and 2000, I worked in a K–6 elementary school in a large urban school district in Massachusetts, in a community with a large, ethnically-mixed population of 25,000 students in more than 50 schools. The school that I worked in enrolled more than 600 students, with approximately 50% minority (Hispanic and African-American) group membership. In my capacity as staff development provider, I interviewed school administrators, staff and teachers, observed classrooms and provided feedback to 12 teachers regarding their uses of media and technology in the classroom, and conducted workshops and seminars focused on integrating media literacy and communication arts into the curriculum (Hobbs, 1998a). From these experiences, I generated a typology of the most common practices that I observed in elementary and secondary classrooms, practices that appeared to diminish or reduce the potential value of video as a learning tool.

Telephone survey

To gather quantitative data to examine teacher uses and misuses of video in the classroom, a telephone survey was conducted in April of 1996 with a purposive sample of 130 teachers in grades 7–12. This survey was designed to determine the most frequent self-reported types of use of video and other mass media in the classroom and to determine the level of teacher awareness of the use of video for non-educational reasons. This research employed a purposive sample to accomplish two goals: (1) to collect information from teachers who were unlikely to have had formal exposure to media literacy education in the context of staff development or prior graduate education experiences; and (2) to minimize social desirability bias by having telephone interviews conducted by known persons, not strangers. College students from a university in the Northeast were invited to conduct telephone interviews with two of their former middle-school or high-school teachers as part of an assignment on media research methods in a course taught by the author. Students were provided with a written interview protocol, trained in a procedure for conducting the interview and recording data in written form, selected two teachers to interview, and conducted the interviews. The data were then coded by the author and another coder who read the completed protocols and entered the data into a computer spreadsheet. Twenty interviews were coded by the author and the coder to generate categories for coding data and to establish intercoder reliability for the open-ended items on the interview protocol. Intercoder reliability was found to be 91%, an acceptable level to establish agreement on the criteria for assigning open-ended responses to specific categories.

Because of the demographic characteristics of the students who conducted the telephone interviews with former teachers, we assume that a majority of the teachers in this sample were employed at schools in middle-class to upper-middle-class communities. The sample included only teachers working in middle schools or high schools. Public school teachers represented 70% of the sample and the rest taught at

private or parochial schools. Females comprised 61% of the sample and 39% were male. Most of the teachers in this sample were veteran teachers, with an average of 17.8 years of service in teaching, although 25% of the sample had 10 years of experience or less. The sample was evenly split between teachers working in smaller schools (with fewer than 60 full-time teachers) and those working in larger schools (with more than 60 full-time teachers). While private school teachers were disproportionately represented, and teachers who work in poor, urban schools were under-represented, in age, gender and years of work experience, this sample typifies the population of the 1.3 million American high-school teachers in the USA (Market Data Retrieval, 2003).

In the telephone interviews, teachers were asked to report how frequently they used various media (including newspapers, magazines, computers, videotape/TV/film, or camcorders) on a four-point scale. If they had used one of these media during the current semester, they were asked to briefly describe an example of such usage and provide an instructional rationale describing their aims and goals. Finally, they were asked if they had ever witnessed 'non-educational' uses of media in schools by their colleagues, and then asked to report the frequency of this on a four-point scale. Teachers were thanked for their participation and offered the opportunity to receive a copy of the completed research. The telephone interview lasted approximately 10 minutes.

The telephone interviews were designed to confirm the qualitative evidence which suggested that video, film and other media were sometimes used by teachers in non-optimal ways, to suit the needs of teachers instead of students. Because of the rise of school policies that limit video use, teachers are aware that some classroom practices regarding the use of video, films and other media are considered potentially problematic or inappropriate. As a result, the social desirability bias limits the researcher's ability to get accurate information on such instructional practices, even in observational studies. This study makes use of three interview techniques designed to reduce social desirability bias. First, the use of a familiar known individual as interviewer (a former student) increased intimacy and warmth between interviewer and subject. Teachers were aware the interviewers were highly knowledgeable about instructional practices inside the school. Second, teachers were invited to describe in detail specific examples of recent uses of video, films or other media in their own classrooms and to provide a description of the educational objectives for the use of these resources. Finally, teachers were asked about whether they had observed misuses of video media among 'other teachers.' By employing the third-person effect in this way and by minimizing social desirability bias, it was possible to gather reliable data to examine teacher perceptions of the frequency of media misuse among secondary educators.

A typology of non-optimal uses of video in the classroom

Based on qualitative data including observations and interviews with K–12 educators and school administrators, the following seven instructional practices were identified as potentially non-optimal uses of video in the classroom.

No clearly identified instructional purpose

While some teachers use video with clear objectives in mind that they could describe, other teachers could not describe their purpose clearly to the researcher and did not make clear to students the reason(s) or purpose(s) for viewing. In many classroom observations, teachers started a videotape within three minutes of the beginning of the class period, and in some cases, it was not evident what the connection was between the video used and the course subject. For example, an elementary teacher showed *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* with no explanation to students of the purpose of the activity and no viewing-related discussion or activity at the close of the session. When clearly defined objectives are lacking, there is no sound basis for the selection or use of instructional materials, content, or methods. Clearly defined objectives provide students with a means to organize their own efforts toward accomplishment of instructional objectives. With clear objectives in view, students at all levels are better able to decide what activities on their part will help them get to where it is important for them to go.

No use of pause, rewind, or review

While the invention of videotape (and now DVD) has brought tremendous flexibility to the use of visual media in the classroom, teachers rarely made use of the remote control to pause the tape and discuss interesting, difficult, or controversial segments. On only rare occasions did teachers use 'rewind' to review difficult segments. Even when students were watching challenging videos on scientific, historical or political topics, where they were expected to take notes, the interactive features of video were not used. Such neglect of the pause, rewind and review functions reflect both the casual and passive ways in which we use television in the home (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as well as the 'transmission' model of education, where learning is understood as a process of sending information by those who know more to those who know less.

Large-group viewing experiences give teachers a 'break'

Although no teacher or school administrator ever described it as such, large-group viewing experiences are sometimes used as a management tool when staffing needs make it desirable to have 60 or more children in a single location. In some schools, this practice has become an institutionalized weekly feature of the school environment. In one elementary school, teachers from four Grade 2 classrooms sent 100 children to the school library, where they sat on the floor in front of a large-screen TV. This was a weekly practice called 'AV Time' at this school, where for 40 minutes students watched a video that had been selected by one of the four teachers. Video selection was accomplished by teachers who stopped at the local video rental store in their neighborhoods, in an additional duty which rotated among the teachers weekly. Teachers described this practice as a long-standing school tradition, which, since it allowed teachers additional needed preparation time, seemed harmless and

innocuous to them. The justification provided was that the animated children's videos they selected were often based on children's literature, but it appeared that this instructional practice was primarily of value to the instructional staff, creating additional time for preparation and planning.

Teacher mentally disengages during viewing experiences

During classroom viewing, teachers sometimes engage in multi-tasking (like grading papers during video-viewing activities), which may communicate a message to students that viewing is less important than other types of classroom learning. In one observation, Mrs Z. sat at the back of the high-school science class to grade quizzes while students watched a physics program she taped from television some years ago. With five classes a day, she explained, it is difficult for any teacher to stay attentive and focused through repeated screenings. But while Mrs Z exhorted her students to pay attention to the video, her own lack of attention may have been the most important single message students received. Even before children enter school, many have acquired attitudes that watching TV is easier and less intellectually demanding than other classroom activities. Salomon (1981) has found that learning from television is directly linked to children's amount of invested mental effort, demonstrating that when children believe that they will need to watch and listen carefully, they learn more from television.

Teacher uses TV viewing as a reward

Teachers use a wide variety of extrinsic motivational strategies in order to gain compliance in completing certain tasks, inspire high-quality student performances, or keep discipline and order. Offering a video-viewing experience as a reward was a common practice observed, particularly in elementary classrooms. When my son was in the second grade, he came home and reported that if the class earned 100 'points' through completing homework assignments and other good behavior, they would get to view the children's film, *James and the Giant Peach*, in class. Such practices reflect teachers' recognition that video is a highly attractive activity for students and that it serves as a meaningful reward. Many teachers may not perceive this use of video to be problematic since extrinsic rewards can be an effective classroom management tool. However, students receive a powerful indirect message when video is used as a reward for good behavior: television viewing must be the most valuable thing the teacher can offer. Although teachers may not intentionally send this message, this instructional practice places reading and writing activities as the 'hard work,' a kind of suffering that must be endured in order to receive the 'fun,' the delight of watching a videotape in class, and escaping for a time from the classroom routine.

Teacher uses media only as an attentional hook

While teachers use video and film to motivate and inspire interest in a subject, for some teachers, this appears to be the primary and sole aim. Mr M., a high-school

business teacher, was an avid user of media in the classroom. He had a collection of as many as 100 short clips from popular movies, TV shows, ads and classic films. He used them to illustrate various concepts in his business class. 'I use this *David Letterman* clip where Dave enters the GE building to lead into my section of the course on relationships between workers and management,' he explained with pride, pointing to the row of video cassettes on a lower bookshelf. Film and video clips have become a clever way for teachers to force the television-generation to pay attention in class, at least for the introduction of new ideas.

Using media to get students' attention is a common strategy used by teachers in American classrooms and universities, and critics might argue that such use is not a misuse at all, but a valuable strategy that is effective with contemporary students, who have spent 5000 hours with television before arriving in kindergarten (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). But using video as an attentional hook may perpetuate the status quo function of media in American society—as a tool which delivers eyeballs to the screen. This method of using video accepts a problematic premise: that viewers are passive, bored, easily led and driven by their impulses to seek visual pleasure. If a teacher has such expectations about students, she or he may develop curriculum that is essentially persuasive or propagandistic, selling ideas, but not seeking to engage students in wrestling with problems or ideas and not encouraging critical analysis and inquiry.

Teacher uses video to control student behavior

In almost all the cases where video was observed playing on a monitor in a classroom, students were attentive and quiet. Mrs S., a middle-school science teacher, had responsibility for more than 150 children each day. After more than 25 years of teaching, she felt deeply alienated from her students, and the school environment was a source of constant stress for her. 'It's harder and harder to have an orderly classroom, since I have students with a wide range of emotional and behavioral problems, and all ability levels mixed together,' she said. Mrs S. appreciated opportunities to 'plug her kids in' with a science video she taped off the Discovery Channel, a 'fun video' on Fridays, and all manner of TV programs at the holiday and end of school year periods. She felt that students were learning quite a bit from the programs because they were not the kinds of shows her students would choose to view at home. 'This is a teacher who'd probably be lost without television, filmstrips, black-line masters or what have you,' said a colleague in the building. The building principal pointed out that Mrs S. is not a superstar teacher, but that her classes are quiet, her lesson plan book is up-to-date, and students have plenty of 'seatwork' to keep them occupied. Mrs S. is unlikely to experiment with the kind of active student-centered learning experiences that are widely promoted in educational journals and professional magazines. Video-tape is a tool that she uses to 'settle kids down' when the stresses and chaos generated by a roomful of 28 middle-school students threatens to erupt.

These misuses of media stand in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of those scholars, practitioners and business leaders who promote the educational power of audio-visual

media: 'Video is uniquely suited to take students around the globe; to meet new people and hear their ideas; illustrate complex, abstract concepts through animated, 3-D images; show experiments that can't be done in class; and bring great literature, plays, music, or important scenes from history into the room' (National Teacher Training Institute, 2004, p. 1). While many positive functions of video were evident in observing elementary and secondary classrooms over a six-year period in two school districts, many examples of non-optimal film and video usage were also witnessed. Educators do use video in ways that benefit their own needs but do not contribute in a meaningful way to student learning.

A telephone survey was used to provide additional evidence concerning teachers' perceptions of their own aims, goals and practices concerning the use of film and video in the classroom, and to assess their perceptions of the frequency of non-optimal uses. The results of the telephone survey data are reported below.

Survey results

In telephone interviews with 130 secondary-level teachers, participants were asked to report how frequently they used various media (including newspapers, magazines, computers, videotape/TV/film, or camcorders) on a four-point scale. If they had used one of these media during the current semester, they were asked to briefly describe an example of such usage and provide an instructional rationale. Finally, they were asked if they had ever witnessed 'non-educational' uses of media in schools, and asked to report the frequency of this on a four-point scale.

Not surprisingly, television, videotapes and films were more frequently used as teaching tools than other media resources, with 60% of teachers reporting that they used these tools 'frequently' or 'often.' Teachers also reported high levels of use of newspaper articles (53%), magazine articles (50%), computers (48%) but not video cameras (17%). When asked to provide a personal example of their own recent use of media in the classroom, 84% of teachers complied. We coded each example provided by teachers, and although 16% of teachers offered no example, other teachers provided two or three examples, so there were a total of 144 examples of self-reported classroom media use in our dataset. These examples were coded into seven categories, which are described below.

Content delivery approaches represented the majority of educators' descriptive responses, accounting for 46% of the total examples provided. Teachers referred to specific media texts as useful for conveying subject matter, presenting information, and providing illustration of concepts and ideas. Documentaries on World War II, cell biology, the Renaissance, specific famous people including politicians, writers and artists, and National Geographic specials were examples of video resources used. What was notable was how few teachers explicitly described the educational goals of this activity, even when directly queried on this. When teachers referred directly to the outcomes or instructional benefits they expected students to receive, we coded this as the inclusion of an educational goal. However, only 12% of the content delivery examples provided by teachers were accompanied with an explicit educational

goal. For example, one teacher explained that a documentary video on the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt 'helps students understand how Roosevelt's policies were perceived by his political enemies at the time,' and another noted that, 'The concept of cell mitosis is so much more understandable when you actually see the process in action. The video is actually better than the microscope in helping students visualize.' These comments suggest that some teachers demonstrate reflective awareness of their own instructional goals and aims for using video in the classroom. Why did so many teachers not include a description of their educational objectives in using video, even when specifically prompted to provide this? Many teachers appear not to be able to clearly articulate their goals and objectives for the use of video in the classroom. However, it is also possible that teachers in our sample simply presumed the instructional rationale was obvious. It may be an artifact of the telephone survey method that led teachers to not verbally articulate the instructional goals for using specific video tests. Perhaps teachers felt no need to explain their reasoning when their goal was presumably obvious—to provide students with information.

Current events uses of media texts represented 12% of responses, including using *Newsweek* and the local newspaper, giving students quizzes on current events, or requiring students to read something from a newspaper and summarize. Only a small number of these examples referred to non-print news resources, like national television news, CNN Newsroom, or local television news; most examples referred to local print newspapers or weekly newsmagazines.

Film adaptation approaches to using media in the classroom represented 10% of responses, where teachers use a film or video adaptation after students have read the literary work. When asked to explain the educational objectives of this practice, the data provide suggestive evidence that this approach is used in two distinct ways by teachers: some describe the use of film in English teaching in ways that appear to focus on techniques of literary adaptation, using a cross-media comparison to examine characteristics of media form, content, style, and genre. Others describe this approach as a tool to help weaker students participate in the discussion about the story. It is notable that, of the 14 examples provided, seven used words that included references to 'fun,' suggesting that video is a treat or reward after the 'heavy' work of reading literature, providing partial confirmation of one potential misuse identified through qualitative research. Comments included: [We watch *Romeo and Juliet* because] 'it's good to conclude the unit with a little fun and they enjoy it,' and 'After slogging through *Hamlet*, they get a kick out of seeing how the filmmaker visualizes the ghost,' and '*To Kill a Mockingbird* is such a great movie—it's one of the few black and white movies that the kids really like.' This data provides additional support for the qualitative findings presented earlier that show that some teachers use video as a reward for students or as a break from real learning.

A number of examples provided by teachers involved *the use of technology tools to create or analyze information.* These examples, representing 16% of the examples, specifically referred to students creating a specially designed media message using computers or other technology tools. The most common examples were projects involving students' use of PowerPoint presentation software. A few examples

involved assignments where students created messages using videotape. For example, one teacher described the making of a public service announcement in health class.

Only a small number of examples concerned the *use of videotape to document student performance*, comprising 6% of the sample of responses. Examples of this included videotaping student speeches, debates, experiments or plays.

Approaches which noted the value of *videotape or print media as a means to start discussion or stimulate student writing* were infrequent, representing only 6% of the sample. One teacher described the use of a popular TV drama to generate rich student-initiated discussion about health issues related to alcoholism, for example, while another described the use of a *New Yorker* magazine essay as a stimulus for discussion and writing in a senior-level English class. There were only a few examples provided by teachers that included the use of popular, contemporary mass media (media texts that students might have been expected to be familiar with from the home viewing environment). It may be that teachers infrequently use popular media like television programs or contemporary films or that the social desirability bias limited teachers' responses towards providing media examples that were clearly and unequivocally educationally appropriate. Further research should examine the frequency of video usage to stimulate classroom discussion or promote writing skills.

Some teachers described the *use of videotape in teaching foreign language skills*, particularly describing the use of foreign TV commercials and popular programs to provide 'real-world' opportunities to build listening comprehension skills. Language skill examples comprised 4% of the sample of responses. Half of these examples included popular media (including TV commercials, dramas and comedies) from France, Spain, and Germany, while half focused on specifically designed instructional materials.

Data from the telephone survey suggest that teachers primarily use media as vehicles for delivering informational content to students. While some teachers encourage students to use media and technology tools for communication, research, self-expression and problem-solving, these uses are far less common. However, the limitations of the research methodology must be taken into account in appreciating the evidence presented here. Perhaps the quality of the examples provided by teachers is an artifact of the telephone interview method, which may have encouraged teachers to give short, easily explainable examples instead of complex, more detailed ones. Future research should document characteristics of teachers' use of various media in classrooms, including ethnographic reports, diary methods, and observational studies. To better understand the non-optimal uses of media in the classroom, it is important to understand what contextual and other factors may cause content delivery approaches to be so common, and to explore why many of the other uses involving mass media resources are infrequently used.

After asking teachers to describe an example of their own use of media in the classroom, the interviewer asked about non-optimal uses of media. In introducing teachers to the issue, the interviewer said: 'A few teachers probably use videotapes, computers or camcorders for reasons that may not be truly educational. For example, they may use a videotape to fill time, to keep students quiet, just for fun at the end of

the week or before vacations, or as a reward for good behavior. Have you ever observed this?' Eighty-five percent of the teachers responded in the affirmative. In a follow-up question, teachers were asked how common this practice was in their current school, on a four-point scale from very common to not common at all. More than half (51%) of teachers indicated this practice was very common (11%) or common (40%). Only 12% indicated that these practices were uncommon, giving the lowest ranking on the four-point scale. Most teachers in our sample were well aware that video is used for purposes that are not truly educational, and most teachers recognized that this practice is a routine dimension of the school environment.

In the telephone interviews, however, a few teachers were troubled by the intimation that 'having fun' was an example of a non-optimal use of media. Some teachers stated that the occasional use of entertainment media in the classroom for entertainment purposes is educationally appropriate—and that having fun can and should be an acceptable motive for using media in the classroom. One teacher pointed out how important it is for students to enjoy reading, for example, and that pleasure in viewing is no different from pleasure with other texts. Others mentioned the patterns in group dynamics and bonding which help to create an effective learning environment. According to one teacher:

> In no way do I want to sound as though I condone the misusing film or wasting time in schools. However, there are times when showing a film for fun is meant just as that. I'd hate to think that we are so task-oriented that we can't take time out once in a while to have fun as a group! This builds class morale which spills over into the just plain tough learning time. I don't condone those few (and they really are few) cases where a teacher constantly shows films and rarely teaches, using it as a babysitter. However, sometimes it's just plain fun!

This evidence demonstrates that defining the optimal use of films and video in the K–12 classroom can reflect the often tense relationship between play, entertainment, and conceptualizations of motivation and engagement as dimensions of authentic learning that have been a component of many educational debates throughout the twentieth century. Media educators at all levels would do well to reflect on this complex question. In reflecting upon the role of engagement and motivation as a dimension of learning, Shulman wonders:

> Is engagement a means to an end, a proxy, or an end in itself? Are pedagogies of engagement a way to involve the minds, the hearts, the hands and feet, the passions and interests of students who are otherwise inclined to learn passively? Is the hallmark of these pedagogies the fact that they grab the student's interest? Or is their purpose not only to grab but to hold that interest, not only to entice but to instruct? (2002, p. 38)

It is important for teachers to reflect deeply on the appropriate balance between the 'work' and the 'fun' of teaching with films, videotapes and other mass media materials, just as they must critically examine the relationship between viewing experiences and active learning when audio-visual media texts are used in the classroom. Teachers' reflective discourse on these issues, done collaboratively in school-wide communities, can nurture a sense of consensus about the range of appropriate and less optimal strategies for using media in schools.

Implications for the future

Most of the non-optimal uses of film, video and media resources identified here reflect teachers' use of media as a way to reduce the demands of the job or the perception that video is entertaining and motivating to students, but not as 'serious' or deserving of full-press intellectual effort as other sorts of texts. As educators at all levels (from pre-K to post-graduate) have become increasingly comfortable in letting students learn by viewing, it has become acceptable to depend on this same strategy to accomplish other, non-educational goals: to calm students down when they are agitated, plug them in when there is no substitute teacher, or let the tape roll through the entire period when a teacher is unprepared for a lesson. Just as parents across America use television as an electronic babysitter, it appears that many elementary and secondary school teachers do the same.

This study demonstrates that non-optimal uses of film, videotape and other mass media are part of the day-to-day operating practices of many American public schools, and that these practices are perceived by educators to be common practices at the middle-school and secondary levels. While content delivery approaches are dominant, this study found that teachers do use a wide range of methods for using films, videotapes and other media materials in the classroom in science, language learning, health, literature, and social studies. While only a small proportion of teachers use media as a vehicle for documenting student performance, or as a tool for creating messages or stimulating classroom discussion or writing, these practices are occurring in some classrooms. However, this research shows that many teachers use video and mass media in routine ways without much explicit reflection on their educational aims and goals. It is ironic that, while video usage is common in American public schools, many teachers have not fully thought through their own educational goals and objectives for using these materials in the classroom.

Most of the media materials that teachers use in school are easily recognizable as educational fare. History and science documentaries and filmic literary adaptations were the most common examples teachers offered as examples. In recent years, scholars have been urging teachers to use contemporary popular media (like advertising, news, situation comedies and reality TV) to promote critical thinking in response to the messages of contemporary culture (Duncan, 1997; Luke, 1997; College Board, 2000; Hobbs, 1998b). This study found little evidence of the critical use of popular media in the classroom. Research is needed to better determine whether and how popular media texts are being used in American K–12 classrooms.

This research demonstrates the dominance of content delivery approaches to using media in the classroom, which appear to be consistent and well-entrenched educational practices in schools. In order to encourage large numbers of teachers to include the critical analysis of media in the classroom, including student-created media production activities, teacher-educators would be well-advised to build connections between media literacy instructional practices and the now-common content delivery approaches to using films, videotapes and mass media in schools. Such connections would encourage classroom change by modifying, extending and enhancing the

existing practices of teacher behaviors. Embedding media literacy concepts and activities within existing uses of mass media resources in the classroom is likely to be effective, especially for established, career educators who have been teaching for 20 years and who are likely to continue in the profession for another 20 years. This could be simply accomplished by (1) incorporating pre-viewing discussion; (2) using viewing and note-taking as part of an 'active viewing' strategy; (3) discussing open-ended critical questions that involve students in analyzing the author's purpose, point of view, issues of representation, and methods of developing ideas through language, image, and sound; and (4) implementing simple media production activities that promote an appreciation for the constructedness of media messages.

Media literacy advocates and professional development providers would do educators a service by acknowledging (and not ignoring) non-optimal practices as an existing part of the school culture. Teachers need opportunities to reflect upon the implications of maintaining these practices in an age when students are already exposed to media for nearly eight hours per day (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999) and when passive media use is ubiquitous in most American homes (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The practice of applying critical thinking to media messages is unlikely to ever take hold in American schools until educators gain a more reflective, thoughtful stance in relation to the ways in which video and film are currently used in contemporary education contexts.

Notes on contributor

Renee Hobbs directs the Media Education Lab at Temple University, USA, and is a co-founder of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), the national membership organization that hosts the National Media Education Conference. She co-directed the Ph.D. program in Mass Media and Communication at Temple University in 2004–2005 and currently hosts the Media Smart Seminars, a free professional development program for educators, media professionals and community leaders.

References

Aiex, N. (1999) *Mass media use in the classroom* (Bloomington, IN, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication, Eric Digest D-147, ED 436 016).

Alvermann, D., Moon, J. & Hagood, M. (1999) *Popular culture in the classroom: teaching and researching critical media literacy* (Newark, DE, International Reading Association).

Aufderheide, P. (1993) *Media literacy: a report of the national leadership conference on media literacy* (Washington DC, The Aspen Institute).

Blum, J. (2004, March 4) Sixth graders are shown excerpts of Passion; teacher on leave over R-rated film, *Washington Post*, p. B1.

Buckingham, D. (2003) *Media education: literacy, learning and contemporary culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press).

Burns, R. (1993) Teaching with television, *Tech Trends,* 38(2), 4–7.

College Board (2000) *Pacesetter English.* Available online at: http://www.collegeboard.com/about/association/pace/pace_english.html (accessed 28 February 2004).

Cuban, L. (1986) *Teachers and machines: the classroom use of technology since 1920* (New York, Teachers College Press).

Duncan, B. (1997) Learn more about popular culture, *Telemedium,* 43(2), 20.

Flood, J., Heath, S. B. & Lapp, D. (1997) *Handbook of research on teaching literacy through the communicative and visual arts* (New York, Macmillan).

Forsslund, T. (1991) Factors that influence the use and impact of educational television in school, *Journal of Educational Television,* 17(1), 15–30.

Hobbs, R. (1994) Pedagogical issues in U.S. media education, in: S. Deetz (Ed.) *Communication yearbook 17* (Newbury Park, CA, Sage Publications), 453–466.

Hobbs, R. (1996) Expanding the concept of literacy, in: R. Kubey (Ed.) *Media literacy in the information age* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Press), 163–186.

Hobbs, R. (1998a) Media literacy in Massachusetts, in: A. Hart (Ed.) *Teaching the media: international perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 127–144.

Hobbs, R. (1998b) *The Simpsons* meet Mark Twain: analyzing popular media texts in the classroom, *English Journal,* January, 49–53.

Kaiser Family Foundation (1999) *Kids and media @ the new millennium.* Available online at: http://www.kff.org/entmedia/1535-index.cfm (accessed 27 October 2003).

Kubey, R. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990) *Television and the quality of life: how viewing shapes everyday experience* (Hillsdale, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

Larsson, D. (2001) *Survey: use of film in Minnesota high schools.* Unpublished study, Minnesota State University English Department, 10 May. Available online at: http://english2.mnsu.edu/larsson/SCS/MNSurvey.html (accessed 24 November 2005).

Luke, C. (1997) Media literacy and cultural studies, in: S. Muspratt, A. Luke & P. Freebody (Eds) *Constructing critical literacies: teaching and learning textual practice* (Cresskill, NJ, Hampton), 19–49.

Market Data Retrieval (2003) *American public school educators.* Catalog (Shelton, CT, Market Data Retrieval).

Masterman, L. (1985) *Teaching the media* (London, Routledge).

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding media: the extensions of man* (New York, New American Library).

National Teacher Training Institute (2004) Why use video in the classroom? Available online at http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/ntti/resources/video4.html (accessed 19 May 2004).

Postman, N. (1969) *Teaching as a subversive activity* (New York, Knopf).

Salomon, G. (1981) Introducing AIME: assessment of children's mental involvement with television, in: H. Kelly & H. Gardner (Eds) *Viewing children through television* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey Bass), 89–103.

Shulman, L. (2002) Making differences: a table of learning, *Change,* 34(6), 36–44.

Stevens, L. (2001) *South Park* and society: instructional and curricular implications of popular culture in the classroom, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy,* 44(6), 548–555.

Study of School Uses of Television and Video (1997) *1996–1997 School year summary report* (Washington DC, Corporation for Public Broadcasting) (ED 413 879).

Weller, D. & Burcham, C. (1990) Roles of Georgia media specialists perceived by teachers, principals and media specialists, *Perceptual and Motor Skills,* 70(3), 1360–1362.

Zirkel, P. (1999) Showing R-rated videos in school, *NASSP Bulletin,* 83(607), 69–73.