

TEACHING WITH ROCK VIDEOS



WE HAVE LONG KNOWN THAT BY THE TIME TEENS GRADUATE from high school, they will have spent twice as much time in front of the television set as they have spent in the classroom. The time spent in church school classrooms, youth group meetings, and worship settings is small compared to that invested in front of the television screen. Many educators wonder which messages, those of the television or those of the church, are having the most impact on young people.

For the twelve-to-twenty-four-year age range, watching rock music videos has become a favorite activity, and some concern has been recently expressed about both the lyric content of some of the latest rock music as well as the video images portraying the songs' messages.

A recent statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communication expressed concern over the widespread viewing of rock music videos by children and teenagers. The pediatricians wrote that these videos contain "an excess of sexism, violence, substance abuse, suicides, and sexual behavior." They urged parents to restrict the amount of time their children watch the videos and to view them with their children and talk about the experience together ("Impact of Rock Lyrics and Music Videos on Children and Youth," by American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communication, in *Pediatrics*, Vol. 83, No. 2, February 1989; page 314).

Talking about our television viewing is something that doesn't come easily. A nation of "couch potatoes" is not accustomed to actively interacting with what happens on the tube. Disturbing

statements like these of the pediatricians, however, may motivate more and more people to take a big step and begin to examine more closely the values and messages of the programs they watch.

Since the early 1970's, I have used electronic media with children and youth as a way to help them become active rather than passive viewers and listeners. To be an active consumer of today's media is to be able to discern the values that are being promoted and sold and to compare them with the values of Christian faith. Through questions, discussion, the sharing of statistics, and by simply talking back to the television set, otherwise passive viewers are

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encouraged to judge consciously media's values according to standards set by our faith traditions.

In the case of rock music videos, church educators have a natural educational context within the youth ministry program. During the last four years, I have worked with junior and senior high school students to help them understand the value-laden impact rock music videos have on their lives and to help them weigh these values against those of their Christian faith.

What I have learned is that these young people are not used to talking about what they experience on television. While they like the idea of watching music videos in a religious education setting (they are often amazed adults would even think of doing that), they immediately become uncomfortable when asked to discuss the experience at any depth. One of the educator's tasks is to be patient with the discomfort and find ways to reinforce active, participatory television viewing.

PLAN TO WATCH VIDEOS TOGETHER

Assemble your group around a television set that is hooked up to cable so you can watch the Music Television Channel (MTV) with its 24-hour video programming. Before you do this, it would be wise for you as an adult leader to spend some time getting acquainted with the videos so you can prepare for the discussion. Take note of the commercials too, for these are some of the most sophisticated "music videos." You will discover that many commercials are now following the artistic lead of rock videos and are promoting similar images and values.

★ DISCOVER YOUR GROUP'S VIEWING HABITS

Begin the discussion by finding out how many television sets are in group members' homes, how many hours a day their sets are on (the national average is a little over eight hours), how many hours a day they personally watch television, how many have watched videos before, and how often. Find out from the group some reasons why they think music videos are so popular. Have them list some of the ways they think the videos influence their lives. You will find that today's youth are quite knowledgeable about television's influence on their lives and are articulate about the role of music videos in teen culture.

★ SHARE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MUSIC VIDEOS

Each of us carries personal opinions, judgments, and assumptions about the topics we bring to discussion. Let the group know how these influence your thinking on the topic and why this particular discussion is important

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to you. I usually begin this part of the program by reading Romans 12:2, in which Paul writes the church, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

One big assumption I have is that learning can be a pleasurable and enjoyable experience, opening up new ways of understanding our personal lives and our culture. The word *education* itself is from a Latin root meaning "to lead out." And when we learn together, it is possible that we might be led out of some of our conforming ways and transformed, as Paul says, into a new kind of person.

I usually share four other assumptions about music videos:

1. Videos are a modern art form combining music, cinematic image, drama, and poetic lyric. Videos use traditional and experimental film techniques, utilizing special camera angles, imaginative uses of lighting, varied film speeds and color, animation, and special effects. Stage sets, costumes, characters, and plots highlight the dramatic quality of certain videos. One may witness a classical painting school portrayed in video form. The songs themselves represent a full range of poetic styles, and the poetry of the lyrics often invites close attention. The melodies and chord structures of the music range from traditional ballads to classic rock 'n' roll to the latest in computer-generated rhythms and sounds. By focusing on individual parts of the art work, or simply appreciating the whole, one will enter a world of some very creative uses of an electronic medium.

2. The messages of the videos are varied and worthy of our study. You will find some videos promoting political causes, such as the farm crisis, environmental awareness, or an anti-nuclear stance, with others telling stories about personal struggles with loneliness, a lost love, some parental conflict, the joy of living, or raw sexual passion.

3. Videos elicit many different feelings in a viewer and can be pleasurable, humorous, puzzling, violent, or repugnant. To feel these feelings is a normal response to powerfully packaged video messages. Becoming aware of these feelings, as well as learning how to give them names, is an important part of developing one's identity. Some may have strongly held opinions about certain videos, based on the feelings they have felt when watching them. It is good to express these feelings in the group discussion.

4. By talking about these videos we can become more conscious of their power in our lives, we can identify the messages and values, and we can decide how these values will affect the ones we already hold. Christian education is a process by which we hear and experience the values of our faith and weigh them against the values of the culture and society in which we live. Our discussion is an experience in Christian education.



★ LIST YOUR PURPOSES FOR STUDYING MUSIC VIDEOS

It is always useful to share with groups the leader's educational purposes. The purposes I have are to help youth:

- talk about the media they use;
- develop an awareness of the overt and subtle messages in music videos;
- identify some of the messages of Christian theology;
- compare and contrast the messages of certain videos with those of our theology;
- become critical consumers of their media;
- gain the courage to refuse negative values suggested by certain videos.

★ IDENTIFY CHRISTIAN VALUES

If you have time, have the group make collages from magazine pictures that portray what it means to be a Christian person. You could also sing a song or hymn, watching for the messages of values of Christian faith. However you lead into this, your purpose is to make a list of Christian values that suggest what it means to be a Christian person. These values provide a context for evaluating the messages promoted by the music videos you choose to watch.

WATCHING THE VIDEOS: FIFTEEN SUGGESTIONS

1. Provide a list of feeling words (such as sad, happy, confused, bored, aroused, disturbed, relaxed) and invite the viewers to make a list of all the feelings they have while watching a particular video. Note the variety of feelings and discuss them together.

2. Notice the kinds of people in the video: age, sex, race, social class. What does the video say about how certain groups of people should live or act? What groups of people are missing from the video (elderly, minorities, the poor or disadvantaged)?

3. Note the ages of the singers, and guess the ages of the video's producers. How is their outlook and experience different from or similar to a typical teenager's?

4. Note the way sexuality is portrayed in the video: What are the dominant male/female roles, What is the video saying about what it means to be a man or a woman, What kinds of sexual behaviors seem to be promoted or discouraged?

5. Notice the material values in the video: the kinds of clothing worn, the age and models of cars, the style of housing, and the feel of the other settings in which the story takes place.

6. Ask about the role alcohol and drugs play in the video.

7. If the video portrays a conflict, how is it resolved?

8. List any particular issues raised by the video (abortion, nuclear war, teen pregnancy, loneliness).

9. Jot down some of the powerful images that stick in your mind as you watch. Make lists of the values, opinions, and lifestyles you feel the video is trying to promote or tear down. Compare and contrast this list

with your list of Christian values.

10. Discover whether the lyrics of the song match the video images. Would you have chosen different images to illustrate the song? When the video story doesn't seem to match the lyric story, how does that add or detract from the message?

11. Count the number of edits or picture changes. Time the video, and then divide time by the number of edits to discover how frequently the images change (many change every 3-4 seconds). Discuss the implications of a "fast edit" culture in which short attention spans are encouraged and in which fast action, flashy color, and peppy music determine whether one will pay attention to a particular message. How does one sit in traditional class or worship service with a "fast edit" mentality?

12. Share some statistics about the relationship of certain social problems and the ways these behaviors and problems are portrayed on television. Is there a relationship, for example, between increasing incidents of classroom violence against teachers and videos that humorously portray lack of discipline and even violence in the classroom?

13. Discuss what makes messages interesting and how schools and churches might improve the ways they proclaim their messages.

14. Watch a video, but turn the sound off. Note the images, and try and guess the story. Then listen to a song, but don't watch the video. Try and guess the story. Do the lyrics of the song match the video images? Would you have chosen different images to illustrate the song? What does it mean to raise a generation of young people in videos that often do not match the lyrics with the image you would expect? Do videos take our imaginations away from us?

15. Discuss commercials and their similarity to music videos. Note the number of edits in a commercial, and divide by the length of time. Watch a commercial, and turn off the sound. What happens? How do commercials affect the choices you make? Are music videos just another advertising vehicle for certain products and lifestyles?

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★ CONCLUDING THE PROGRAM

After group viewing and discussion time, repeat your reasons for the program. I often close with an expression of my hopes that as a result of the discussion, teens will

- practice their Christian values and learn to know the difference between the values they try to hold and many of the others being promoted by our culture;
- continue to enjoy videos while having a clearer understanding of their persuasiveness;
- remember that videos are produced and performed by people who are often much older than the viewers and that the adult world portrayed is often not a world for which teens are prepared;
- continue to talk about the videos

they watch, and bring to the group to discuss any disturbing or enlightening new videos;

- practice using their imaginations by listening to music on the radio and conjuring one's own images rather than growing dependent on videos to provide the images;
- develop the will simply to turn the television off and use their leisure in other ways, such as exercise, hobbies, and companionship.

★ CONCLUSION

The church educator who brings the forms and messages of electronic media into the classroom and engages otherwise passive viewers in some of the discussions listed above will contribute to the development of the critical faculties teenagers

need to evaluate the many messages promoted by music videos.

While the values church educators seek to promote are consistently being questioned by those portrayed in many music videos, we nonetheless labor in the hope that by encouraging active involvement in a media-critical process, we help develop individuals who will stand fast with Christian values and will have the courage to "be transformed" rather than conform to the dominant values of an increasingly violent and consumerist culture.

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