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Digital and Media Literacy: The Pleasures and Perils of Online Pranking

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DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY



Developing critical thinking and communication skills are vital for 21st-century students. Discover how focusing on online pranks with your students can lead to media literacy and ethical responsibility.

BY RENEE HOBBS

Controversial content is plentiful online. One out of three teens has seen violent or hateful content online. Most teens have seen online pornography. In one study of European children and youth, it was found that teenagers encounter more online risks than younger children and that boys encounter more exposure to violent and sexual content. In particular, teen boys appear to pay less attention to online risk, suggesting they may be harder to reach in terms of safety advice, which is a concern since they encounter more risk.

Teenage boys are also most likely to perpetuate risk by bookmarking pornographic or violent online content and sending it to friends.

In this media-rich world, how can school counselors help students deepen digital and media literacy skills? One way is by exploring the ethics of online pranking. Adolescents are developmentally focused on taking risks, pursuing experience for the sake of experience and seeking out novelty, complexity and intense situations. But because many parents and teachers feel like young people are the experts when it comes to online media, they may be unlikely to initiate conversations about controversial online content, in part because of ignorance and in part because of confusion about how to talk about it.

There are healthy and unhealthy ways to acquire social power. Unfortunately, among some teens, one quick and easy way to gain social power is to watch or create a drinking video. There are thousands of them online. Several have more than one million page views. These videos feature young people drinking to excess, sometimes with humiliating consequences. Students can learn cutting and other forms of self-mutilation

by watching online videos. And fight videos, which feature children, teenagers or young adults engaged in real or staged fighting, are popular online entertainment.

It's important to note that offensive media content is protected by the U.S. Constitution under the First Amendment. However, that doesn't mean we don't need to teach our students how to respond to this type of media.

Start the Conversation

To promote digital and media literacy competencies, you can open up a respectful and safe conversational space to examine ethical and social issues associated with controversial online content.

It's not easy, however. Lots of teens will shrug off controversial content as no big deal, maintaining a pose of disinterested stoicism to avoid revealing genuine feelings on a complex and controversial topic. Many teens maintain high levels of secrecy involving their online activities and will not admit to exposure to offensive content or participation in problematic behaviors. But I've found one way to open up authentic dialogue about controversial online content is by

discussing a particular type of YouTube video – the online scary maze game pranking videos.

Pranking videos can serve as a starting point for launching critical conversations about the complex ethical relationships that exist among users of online social media. Nearly everyone knows somebody who takes delight in playing pranks. The pleasure of the prank can be described by the concept of symbolic inversion, where expressive behavior inverts or contradicts commonly held cultural codes, values and norms. By inverting power relationships, pranksters gain a form of social power.

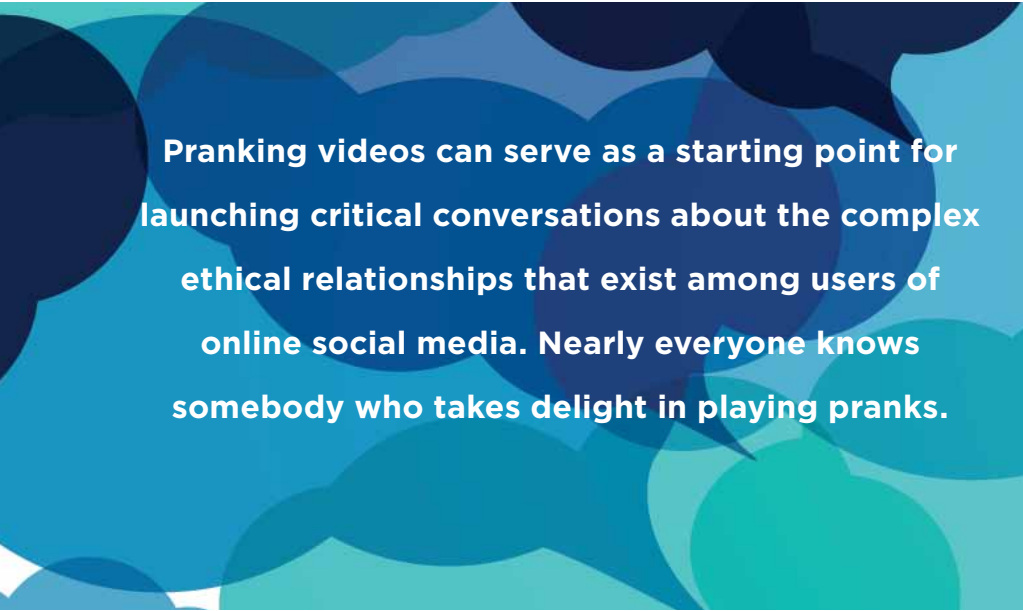
Historically, pranking is well-documented in both ancient and medieval literature. Puns, jokes and humorous rituals were a typical part of medieval culture. By raising the power of the prankster and lowering the power of the ones fooled, communities of laughter maintained patterns of social exclusion or inclusion, reputation or contempt.

Indeed, YouTube pranks are similar to older types of media productions that involve startling or surprising people to document their reactions. For example, some television viewers of the 1950s and 1960s remember "Candid Camera," a program that featured ordinary people being pranked by small crises and other unexpected events, which host Allen Funt noted could occasionally veer into the realm of cruelty. Funt once explained to an interviewer, "If you want to know what holds the man together...you apply a real jolt, and see where the cracks appear."

Today, such pleasures are called *lulz*. It's another form of social power. This popular catchphrase is used to express the enjoyment experienced when pranking someone or by posting offensive or disgusting content that will shock or offend others.

Scary Maze Game Videos

I have never met a 12- to 19-year-old who isn't familiar with this online prank. The video phenomenon began around 2002 when interactive flash videos known as scare pranks or scary mazes began to emerge across the Internet. Upon clicking the link, the viewer is presented with a



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puzzle game that requires a high level of concentration, only to be disrupted by an ear-piercing scream and ghastly photos from horror films. Scary maze Web sites were originally shared via e-mail, chat rooms or instant messages before the advent of YouTube.

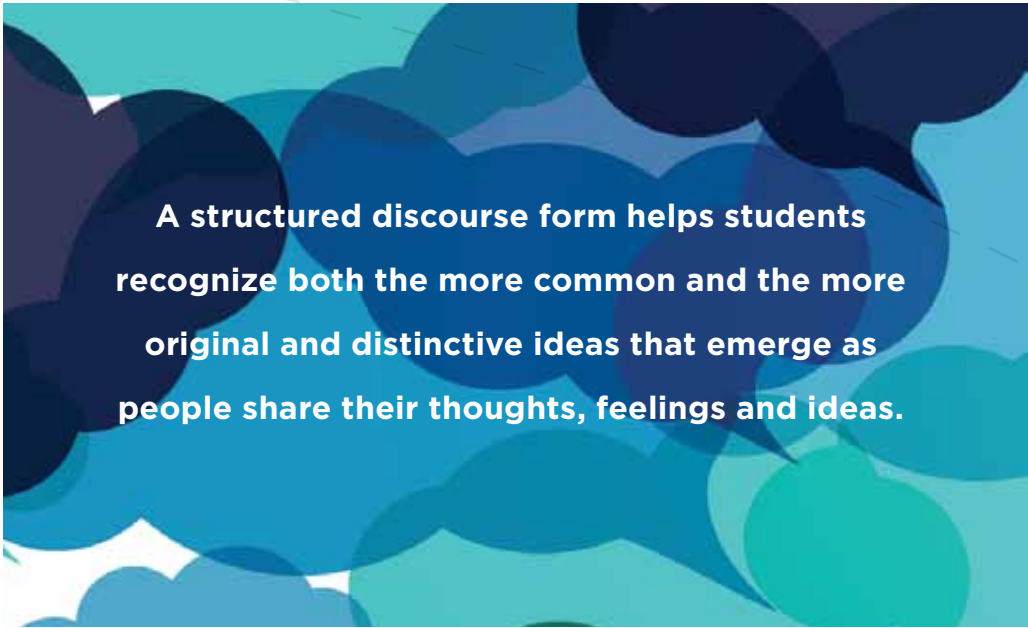
High school students confirm the popularity of these games. When I asked a group of 10th-grade students how many had played the maze game, all but two hands went up into the air. When I asked how many had seen a YouTube video depicting someone being pranked, all but three hands were raised. One high school student had even created a scary maze video herself, featuring a family member being pranked.

In September 2011, a YouTube search on the keywords “scary maze game” displayed more than 11,000 videos, which generally feature a person who is scared by playing the game. Videos have been created by YouTube users from Spain, France, Germany, Turkey, China and other countries. The top-ranked video, “Scary Maze Prank – The Original,” has been viewed more than 23 million times, attracting more than 48,000 comments.

The video features a young boy playing the maze game on his home computer. When startled by the sound of screaming and a gruesome face dripping with blood, he screams, hits the computer monitor instinctively and then runs away from the computer, crying uncontrollably in a deeply visceral fear response.

I showed one of the scary maze game videos in a high school classroom to open up a dialogue about our ethical and social responsibilities in sharing online video and other content. I chose one featuring a young girl, about age 7, playing the game while seated at a computer. I deliberately darkened the room before screening the video. At the moment of the scare, the child cries and sobs uncontrollably, looking to her mother for comfort as the adults in the room laugh. As is typical, students spontaneously laughed when watching the child’s reaction.

Afterward, while sharing reactions, we kept the lights low. I asked students to use this structured verbal response: “This made me feel (fill in the blank)



A structured discourse form helps students recognize both the more common and the more original and distinctive ideas that emerge as people share their thoughts, feelings and ideas.

because (fill in the blank).” Students expressed ideas such as:

“It made me feel happy because it’s hilarious to watch the way the kid reacts.”

“It made me feel excited because I knew what was going to happen.”

“It made me feel angry because there is an adult there who is exploiting a child.”

This structured verbal format is not necessary for all students to engage in sharing feelings, but I have found it tends to equalize the differences between students who are more and less comfortable with expressing their feelings. It encourages them to use full sentences while describing and reflecting on their feelings and promotes divergent responses, too. It solves one of the big problems when engaging in discussion with young people – their tendency to repeat the same ideas over and over, even when the point has already been made. A structured discourse form helps students recognize both the more common and the more original and distinctive ideas that emerge as people share their thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Adolescents had a lot to say about these videos. We discussed these questions:

- What are the motives of an amateur video producer who uses young children’s fear as a form of entertainment?
- Why are online videos featuring young

children’s fear responses more popular than those that feature a teen or older subject as the target of the prank?

- Do audiences bear any responsibility or obligation in their decision to view or not view these videos? Why or why not?

Addressing Ethics

Online pranking videos provide a relatively safe and structured opportunity to discuss the ethics of representation. When we use media, we can choose to treat the subjects represented as textual objects, or we can choose to see them as representations of real people. If we treat them as objects only, then no ethical issues are raised. After all, YouTube videos are really just pieces of digital code, a string of 0s and 1s. But if we acknowledge the human beings who are represented digitally, we must consider their point of view. Authors, audiences and subjects are tied together in a complicated relationship of mutual dependence.

After all, when you’re filming someone, you are simultaneously participating in a real experience while you’re creating an illusion. Through the lens of the viewfinder, you create a representation of the complex, three-dimensional, living, breathing human being who is

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in front of the camera. But as you create the film, you, the filmmaker, can control and shape how the subject is represented through editing. You have a form of social power that shapes how an audience experiences the subject. There we see that a clear ethical relationship emerges.

When exploring social power, use the golden rule to initiate meaningful conversation about social and ethical issues. In discussing these videos, we can ask the following:

- Should subjects have to give their consent before images that feature them are shared? Why or why not?
- How would you feel if someone created and shared an online video featuring a depiction of you that you felt was humiliating or embarrassing?
- What if you gave your OK but other people who viewed it thought it made you look stupid? Does that make a difference? Why or why not?

Young people are wrestling with these kinds of issues all the time because



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social networking encourages people to represent both self and others in ways that bring social power to the forefront. Adolescents may have thoughtful and often sophisticated reasoning processes that reflect their decision making about what's OK and what's not. Talking about these issues builds digital and media literacy competencies, critical thinking and communication skills, all of which are essential in a media- and technology-saturated society.

Renee Hobbs is the author of a new book, "Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom" (Corwin/Sage, 2011), which helps educators maximize the power of media and technology for teaching 21st-century skills. She is a professor at Temple University's School of Communication and Theater, where she founded the Media Education Lab (www.mediaeducationlab.com). She can be reached at renee.hobbs@temple.edu.

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