



Van Wilkinson

On the Lighter Side: A Terrible Parable

By Van Wilkinson, *Techmasters*

The audience was technologically attentive – most were launching wireless laptop e-mail or Web surfing as the presenter spoke. The presenter, voice varying as she dutifully emphasized main points and referred to her carefully-crafted and multi-hued PowerPoint, might as well have been presenting in her shower stall.

The pitter-patter of keystrokes issued from the room.

The presenter, sensing the disconnect, injected a joke and got a few laughs from those reverent laptopless anachronisms in the audience who were actually engaged in the presentation.

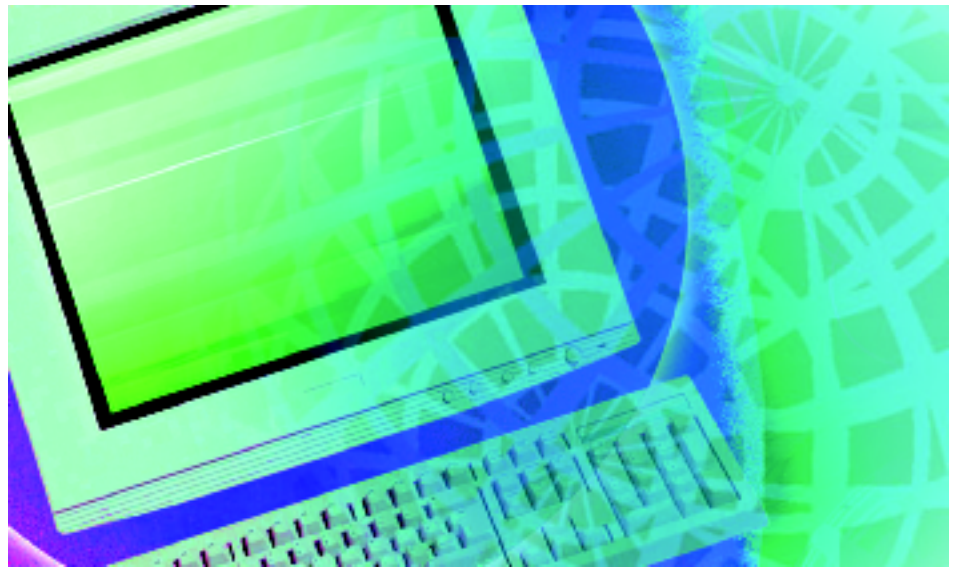
The topic was, “Educational uses of broadband — Go to the back of the bus, again.” Her point was that educators should quit decrying the slow pace of broadband use in the learning community because virtually all new technologies are first used by interests outside of and often contradictory to mainstream educators.

In the darker parts of the room, faces leered, bathed in a pixel-rich screen glow.

“A heavy stick with a pointed end was used as a bludgeon or spear for thousands of generations before it was used as a hoe to till the ground,” she remarked. Some shuffling occurred as people adjusted their posture for better keyboarding.

“High explosives were used in bullets and bombs faster than they were used by road-builders, as Mr. Nobel found out the hard way,” she added. A few “yeps” and “so trues” emitted from scattered listeners.

A cell phone jangled, someone fumbled and a hush-hush side conversation was underway.



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“Pornographers, song-swapping copyright violators, and online gamers did more to promote broadband access in the first two years of dial-up Internet than educators have in the eight years since.”

Suddenly someone from the hitherto glazed-eyed laptop crowd rejoined the presentation with, “What do you mean! How could you! We are the custodians of broadband access,” before drifting back to the laptop.

She continued, “We, the techweenies and digerati, gather worshipfully around the OC3 port and fume about how few beneficial educational applications exist, afraid to break the unspoken credo.”

A few in the audience shifted nervously and said, “You can never have too much bandwidth. We have to be ready for the future.”

The presenter continued with, “Airplanes were used for bombing in 1916, years before passengers flew. V2 rockets fell on England 15 years before we got functional satellites overhead. For a century after its invention, movable type was used exclusively to produce more bibles in an effort to keep literacy confined inside a church structure. Even lowly chalk was used for war paint and skin art long before it was used on school blackboards. Don’t you get it?”

By this time, the audience had bifurcated itself so badly that the threads of continuity in her presentation were tattered beyond repair. Whether she ended the presentation gracefully at this time or whether she disrobed and set her hair on fire before screaming off the stage is immaterial and is still a matter of casual disagreement between those present and semi-present.

The Parable's Point?

Presenters have always faced audiences of varying intensity and interest. Daydreaming, doodling, and off-topic communications have been a part of virtually all lecture-style group gatherings. However, in the name of basic civility, these diversionary behaviors were not flaunted in front of the presenter as an open challenge, at least not in venues where professionals and learners assembled.

Now, we have shed so much mannerliness in the name of techno-prowess that we dare presenters to compete with interactive online devices. Without fear of disdain, we signal the presenter that we are only going to be partial participants, drifting in an out as we flex our multi-tasking muscles. We can data-mine the presentation for those one or two fragments of interesting or new information and pretty much tune out everything else.

So what are some lessons here for presenters facing this type of audience? One lesson may be that the presentation itself may need advance billing: this is a "go ahead and take notes affair" with little audience inter-



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action; or, this is an "audience takes an active part affair," so unplug. This may be a delicate and politically risky move in many settings. Another lesson may be that you need not put a lot of time into your presentation's stylistic aspects (ranging from simple voice inflection or basic visual aids all the way to full immersion multi-media) because most of those in the room will simply not appreciate it. Another lesson may be to resort to gimmicky audience-participation jokes or tricks ("Say, you, in row 16 with the Hawai-

ian shirt, what do you think about that last point I made?"), realizing that angering an already zoned-out group may deflect the point of the presentation ever further.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this diatribe — and, by the way, thanks for reading this far without drifting back to some form of connectivity — is that the hypothetical presenter above raises some interesting assertions about broadband in school classrooms. Yet, from the scenario that unfolded, there was little incentive or opportunity for the audience or presenter to vigorously expect a valuable

give-and-take of ideas and an overall elevation of knowledge about the topic.

We are stripping a presenter's art of its style and making it another digital file.

If what we really want is a downloadable synopsis of all presented material, why have presenters, let alone keynoters—for a keynoter facing this type of audience—what's to key, what's to note?

And, what about that presenter's comments on broadband in the classroom? Are we ever going to investigate them on our PDAs? ■

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