

but school districts have been slow to accept irradiated meats. In Minnesota, one of three school districts participating in a USDA-funded program to educate parents about the process pulled out after Public Citizen, a Washington, D.C.-based consumer watchdog group that opposes

irradiation, issued a report criticizing the project.

Wenonah Hauter, director of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy and Environment Program, said more than 90 percent of the comments submitted to the USDA opposed the use of irradiated food

in school cafeterias.

In early September, the Los Angeles school board rejected a proposal to use irradiated meat in its lunch programs, citing questions about safety. The board's action was quickly followed by a bill from U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., that would

POWER POINTLESS

By Sam Wineburg

With the school year well under way, the family computer has again become the flash point of conflict.

"Daaad!" shrieks a voice, "I was here first!" I dash upstairs to find my 14-year-old son hogging the computer, his older sister tugging at the swivel chair ready to toss him and his books on the floor.

"Your sister was here first," I intone. Thinking fast, I offer the following Solomonic compromise: "She can use this computer, and you can use my laptop."

"But, Dad, it doesn't have PowerPoint!"

When I've suggested to my teenagers that they ought to be doing homework instead of playing on the computer, the response has been a twangy, "But we are doing homework."

Of course. How could I have been so, well, dense? Text flying from the corner of the screen, twirling in midair before landing smoothly in the middle of a magenta background stippled with yellow and red dots, must surely mean another assignment for English or history.

For all their exhortations to be creative, such assignments display an insipid sameness. "Show your understanding of the Middle Ages/the Scramble for Africa/the Dropping of the Bomb using a PowerPoint presentation, an expressive dance, an illustrated poster, or an essay." Or this, a high school "language arts" assignment on characterization: "Accompany your half-page character sketch with five il-

lustrations," a rate of one picture per sentence. All in the name of "multiple intelligences," "learning styles," or the one that rankles me the most: "cognitive pluralism."

Especially for my two teenagers, this "show your understanding" menu is a no-brainer. Why sweat over an essay when you can do custom animation and surf the Web for cool clip art? Why try to get a thesis statement right when you can string together sentence fragments, pair them with cryptic bullet points, and make them tango in QuickTime?

"Look Dad, the alligator at the bottom of the screen can open its mouth." And its connection to the Renaissance is . . . ?

I'm no Luddite and have nothing against PowerPoint. In the past two years, I've even replaced my Mylar overheads with a portable LCD projector and my own modest PowerPoint presentations. But let's not kid ourselves. Creating a presentation is not the same as composing a well-argued piece of writing.

A thesis on why the Soviet Union disintegrated can no more be defended using bullet points than we can journey to Moscow on the wings of a Frommer guide. Working through successive drafts of a history essay—making sure paragraphs connect and assertions are backed by evidence—is hard and inglorious work. Learning to do it well takes practice, lots of crumpled paper, and the mettle to persevere through doubt and frustration. But the effort is worth it.



The homey argumentative essay teaches us lessons desperately needed in our MTV culture: All opinions are *not* created equal; sound argument demands more than flash and a couple of sound bites; evidence goes beyond fancy adjectives escorted by double exclamation points. The essay teaches us to think logically about cause and effect and requires us to consider explanations beyond our pet theories. By plying its form, even those who never achieve a felicity of style can learn order and systematicity of thought.

Forget about cognitive pluralism, kinesthetic and visual intelligence, multimedia presentations, audio-tactile learning styles, field independence, and the rest. My kids get ample practice at home making purple letters hip-hop on a flat-paneled computer screen. Is it too much to ask that at school they learn how to write?

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