

Teacher's Swiftian proposal for a sex room stirs up a fuss



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I knew that it was going to be an interesting meeting with my principal when the opinion page editor of the high school newspaper that I advise came through the door and announced, "We were on CNN last night."

Making things all the more interesting - if that is the right word - is that I'm pretty sure that the reason CNN had picked up the story originally broadcast by KCRA is that they could use the words "high school" and "sex room" in the same sentence.

The 19th century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that "The maker of a sentence, like the other artist, launches out onto the infinite and builds a road into chaos and old night, and is followed by those who hear him with something of wild, creative delight."

Emerson's words reveal a profound truth. That truth is that I can actually make you read a paragraph that begins with the words "the 19th century American philosopher" so long as you think I'll be getting back around to the high school sex room. In fact, I could have written a paragraph about the laws of thermal dynamics, or the theory of supply and demand or causes of the Civil War or any of the other ideas that get taught and sometimes learned in the course of a school day, just so long as you thought it was all leading back to that room.

CNN and KCRA know what'll hook 'em, and so does the teacher at my school who unwittingly stirred the tempest in the teapot on American River Drive.

Back in January, the opinion page editors of the *Mirada* asked their math teacher to write an opinion piece for the paper. He responded with a riff on Jonathan's Swift's "A Modest Proposal." For those of you who were sick that day in freshman composition, Swift wrote a satirical but earnest-sounding pamphlet that called attention to the plight of starving children in 18th century Ireland by proposing that the English eat them. A lot of people took him seriously and the outrage that ensued did more good than the hand wringing Swift may have elicited by a conventional broadside.

The author of the piece in the *Mirada* hoped to call attention to what he saw as a problem of excessive public displays of affection - kids who "lick each other ... like dogs" is how he put it - by calling for the creation of a lunchtime sex room on campus. That would have gotten attention, all right. But like Swift, who offered serving suggestions for the Irish urchins, the teacher devoted one paragraph of his brief article to

how the room would be administered by the teacher of the day.

My principal, a decent man with a strong sense of propriety, was not amused. He hadn't interfered with the paper before, even when articles were critical of school policy. But a piece proposing a sex room - even if the article was social satire intended to instill a greater sense of morality and responsibility in students - was going too far. As he told KCRA, he didn't think public displays of affection were a problem on campus. (That's a point I actually agree with, but I also don't think that's grounds for not printing an opinion article.) And he was concerned that students wouldn't get the satire. (And, OK, when the paper came out some freshmen did think that high school was finally living up to their expectations.)

My principal called the district office and then confiscated papers - at least until the legal issues could be sorted out. The district contacted its lawyers while my students contacted the staff attorney at the Student Press Law Center in Virginia. They all agreed: that because of the strong protection in the California Education Code for student journalists and high school publications, the school had no legal right to hold the papers.

However, being sweet-natured youngsters with a keen sense of irony, the editors readily agreed to the district's demand that they put a disclaimer sticker next to the article saying that it did not reflect the opinion of the school or district administration.

Usually, the opinion page of a high school newspaper captures the attention and enthusiasm of the student body in ways that could only be matched by, say, standardized state tests. But during the couple of days the paper was locked in the principal's office, the Mirada opinion page became the most talked about thing on campus since the boys basketball team made it to the NorCal finals. Some kids even offered the editors five bucks for a bootleg copy of the paper. If there were any kids on campus who hadn't heard about the controversy, they were going to be tipped off by the sticker that this was something to read.

That's often the way with attempted censorship in a free society: It just calls more attention to the thing the censors are trying to suppress.

Thus, I believe, word of the article reached the news desk at KCRA. The station decided to do a thoughtful story on the complicated issue of student press rights and on the challenge of a principal who wants to show his school in the best light but is severely limited by state law in his control over the student media.

Just kidding.

The story had a sex room, teens and even a teacher.

This would get viewers. What else did you need, except maybe a concerned parent hiding in the shadows of an apartment building who would only identify himself as "Ron." That was a nice touch. I can imagine the conversations in the newsroom: "If only that teacher had proposed a sex, drugs and violence room, we'd lead the national news." As it was, CNN along with local stations across the country rebroadcast the story

and nationally syndicated sports commentator Jim Rome even did a segment on the controversy.

And then I got to meet with my principal. First he told me how much he did not like the article. And then he suggested in a way that only bosses and spouses can suggest that I should be more involved in the selection of content for the paper.

And then we actually had a fruitful discussion about what a school newspaper should be and what an adviser's role should be. In the end, I think, we agreed much more than disagreed. The paper should reflect well on the school, but must be allowed to be critical as long as it is fair and balanced. And, oh yeah, no more sex room articles.

But one thing we didn't agree on was the importance of the stack of letters on his desk. After the article appeared in the paper and then the paper appeared on the news, parents and concerned citizens wrote dozens of letters to the school. As he should be, my principal is very sensitive about the school's image and he was not pleased. I wasn't so concerned.

Some parents of middle schoolers in the San Juan district wrote that they would no longer consider sending their kids to Rio because it was now obvious to them that only at Rio do kids make out in the halls. Maybe it's not so horrible these parents will be keeping tabs on the goings on in the halls of other schools.

More letters arrived from as far away as Texas and New Jersey. The writers of those distant and vitriolic epistles had heard of the article but hadn't read it.

(True, some students had, I am told, posted contraband versions on their Web sites when the paper was being held. But I couldn't find the sites and I doubt the letter writers could either. I tried Googling on "sex room" and "high school" and the list that popped up was so disturbing that I shut down my computer and went to wash my hands.)

I think those distant letter writers would be surprised to learn that the article's author is a conservative and upright educator who wrote with the intention of raising the moral standards of teenagers.

As an English teacher, I am used to people writing on stuff they have never read. I know how to deal with students who write essays cribbed from "Cliff Notes": I give them Fs. But what about letter writers lacking in original thought and spouting off on matters they know nothing about? I have a modest proposal for them, too.

We should eat them.

Details at 11.

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