

Birchfield Lesson Kits for PSHE, DVD-ROM (windows only), £149.95
per unit

For the past 18 months in school I've played an unexpected extra role: Coordinator of PSHE & Citizenship. And whilst I may not have welcomed the weekly deadline of having a lesson ready for the teaching team, it has shown me that they are amongst the two most powerful subjects we teach.

First, they offer the capacity to shape students' knowledge and understanding of essential issues which will help them through life; and second because they are powerful ways of communicating the school's values – what we believe in a global society every active citizen need to know about, how to behave responsibly and how to work with others.

That's why I'm a bit hesitant about educational software that promises instant lessons: "No preparation required, simply deliver exciting ready-made lessons to your class". With topics like sex education, drugs and bullying, that strikes me as an unhelpful unique selling point. PSHE shouldn't in any case be about "delivering lessons", especially instant ones. It isn't some kind of inoculation against life, easily served up, administered, then sleeve rolled down because the job is done. It needs to

be about relationships, conversations, and helping young people to mediate a complex world.

Nevertheless, after years of preaching against succumbing to peer pressure, I can see the temptations of the software, especially given those weekly lesson-writing deadlines. The best bits of the software do what good ICT should – they provide us with resources and a level of interactivity that are difficult to achieve through chalk and talk. Thus on bullying there are video clips of a pupil being bullied in different contexts. You click on the clip and watch.

I enjoyed the video clips though, for my taste, there aren't enough of them. The so-called interactive quizzes are more problematic. After choosing a scenario of an old person being bullied, I rebelliously tested the system by responding to questions and saying that the bullying was fun and I'd like to do it again. I scored a decent total overall.

That's where ICT doesn't help us with a subject like PSHE. It can give us screens of facts about bullying, recycling and contraception – the words read aloud in a grating voice as they appear on screen – but they can't add the essential moral dimension, the consequences of our decisions, the reminders of what it is to be human.

McLibel Video

There's an increasing groundswell of unease about the domineering impact of multinational companies. Suddenly we're starting to feel a little more squeamish about the tyranny of choice, especially when exerted by companies like Tesco which now exerts its influence over more than 30% of Britain's daily shopping sales.

As Barry Schwartz says in his ground-breaking book The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less, we have been duped by the promise that choice will make us happier. In fact, it adds to our stress. And our students, who live in a world where everything is up for grabs – designer labels, phone colours, ringtones – can be left bewildered and beleaguered by the big decisions in life.

That's why we owe it to them to educate them about what was once described as the Coca-colonisation of the world, the encroaching power of the global giants.

This video provides a fascinating case study. In 1990 McDonald's slapped writs on five London activists for allegedly libelling them in a leaflet entitled, "What's Wrong with McDonald's?" The global giant successfully silenced three, but Dave Morris and Helen Steel refused to apologise.

In a world where ninety-six percent of American children recognize Ronald McDonald (only Santa Claus rates higher), I'd say this video is essential viewing for our pupils. There's even a former Ronald McDonald – like an Alcoholics Anonymous-member in rehab – talking confessionally about why he quit.

It's not a balanced case, and we owe it pupils to remind them of that., There's also a geekiness about the video which adds to its charm but, in the early stages of a lesson, will have pupils rolling their eyes or sniggering. In places, it has the production values of one of those Open University management videos they used to show in the early hours on BBC2.

Equally, the fact that the key players are not – shall we say - Hollywood types gives the documentary its bite. These are old-fashioned heroes taking on the might of a major corporation. Most compellingly they

reveal the cynical way that McDonald's has used links with sport, words like "nutritious" and "balanced" and the canny psychological tactics of Happy Meals and children's parties to hook the long-term loyalty of children.

We're building the video into our Citizenship course as part of our commitment to building pupils' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities as consumers. Recommended.

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