

Welcome to the Classroom Materials & Media Reviews column, with a transition to announce. For many years we have been very well served by column editor Remy Dou, who is stepping down. I am pleased to be taking over as the new editor, so please join me in thanking Remy for all of his contributions and wish him the best of luck in his new pursuits.

When I sat down to write this introductory column, I spent a lot of time thinking about how classroom media and technology have changed over the past 20 years. When I first started writing technology reviews for *ABT* back in 1999, many of the items I reviewed included CR-ROMs and videos. Publishers were fairly generous sending out their materials when the cost of an expensive software package was a good trade-off for an unbiased and professional review in a well-known journal.

One of the greatest video programs I reviewed was called *The Shape of Life*. This 10-part series covered the evolution of all the major animal phyla, from Porifera to Chordata. It included great state-of-the-art animations of prehistoric oceans and intermixed them with actual footage of the organisms in action. I had seen the video series advertised at a conference I attended, and I recommended to the column editor at the time that we review the product. He contacted the publisher, and after much negotiation they finally sent us all 10 videotapes. Yes, videotapes – this was right at the dawn of the DVD age. I reviewed the series for *ABT* back in 2004.

Well, jump ahead to 2014 at a science teaching conference in Boston. I came across a booth in the exhibition hall with the banner “Shape of Life.” I found that this product contained the same content I had reviewed 10 years earlier, but now all of it was available, for free, online. (So I actually reviewed the content again for *ABT*.)

This takes me to my point. Classroom media collectively has undergone a huge shift

in the past 20 years. Publishers no longer typically provide their content on CD-ROMs or DVDs. Instead, at a huge cost savings, they just post their content online. Many times the publisher will offer a free trial of their product, with the hope that the full version will be purchased. This works out well for teachers because it gives them an opportunity to try the material before purchasing. There are also many materials, such as *Shape of Life*, that are available completely for free online. Many of the publishers create study guides or assessments that relate to their content (in fact, I have been part of many writing teams for these types of materials) and that are well designed to align their materials to state and national standards.

It's always tricky to predict the future, but let me say a few words about where classroom media may be heading. Virtual reality software has greatly improved, with many applications that can be loaded directly onto a cell phone. A great one new to the market is called InViewR. This VR application uses real image data to show the parts of the cell. Users can move through the cell layer-by-layer, getting a perfect view of the cell's parts. Since kids most likely already own the equipment, schools just have to purchase the app and the viewers. This could dramatically cut down on costs and provide students with a great interactive learning experience. Imagine being able to take students to the bottom of the ocean (virtually) and observe marine organisms in their natural habitat. What an engaging way to teach!

Phone and tablet apps are another way teachers will engage students in the classroom. A quick search for “biology” in the App Store resulted in 48 apps that relate to general biology/chemistry topics. These range from a basic biology textbook that has been digitized to gene analysis expression software. Some of these apps have simulations, while others just read text to students. Simulations are another

area where things are likely to improve. Virtual dissections have been around since the 1990s, but the graphics were usually very basic. New computer-generated models take the user right into the organism, allowing them to pick up and manipulate the organ. Technology will continue to advance, and hopefully classroom media will go right along with it.

The purpose of this column remains to serve as a forum for sharing current materials you can use in your classrooms to enhance student learning. Since technology is such a huge part of teaching and learning today, helping classroom teachers make decisions about what's new and what's effective is not only useful, but also desperately needed.

So, let me end by putting out an open call to *ABT* readers for suggestions of things to review (or better yet, let's talk about how you can become a reviewer and get published in *The American Biology Teacher!*). Even if you are not interested in reviewing, please bring my attention to anything you come across you think would be of interest or useful to our members. I would be happy to take a look at it and potentially review these materials in future issues.

Again, I am honored to be taking over as editor of Classroom Materials & Media Reviews and look forward to hearing from NABT members and *ABT* readers with any suggestions for enhancing biology teaching and learning in the classroom through media.

Jeffrey D. Sack
Science Content Writer

JEFFREY SACK is a science content writer specializing in curriculum and assessment. He taught all aspects of biology in both public and private schools for many years and also served as the education director for a traveling museum company. He can be reached at sack.jeffrey@comcast.net.