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# Porn and sex education, porn as sex education

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# Porn *and* sex education, porn *as* sex education

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Both popular and academic discussions of pornography have explored the question of sexually explicit texts as pedagogy. While many commentators and scholars have acknowledged the educational qualities of pornography, there is no universal consensus as to *what* porn teaches its consumers and *how* it works as an educator. Pornography is increasingly itself the subject of educational texts, with 'porn literacy' being debated as a potential addition to the secondary state school curriculum in the United Kingdom and Australia. This article presents an overview of the field of 'porn as pedagogy' and pedagogy about porn. It is modest in scope, relying primarily on recent research and media reportage from Australasia, North America and the United Kingdom. These Anglophone countries have significant similarities in respect to the ways pornography is framed as a moral and/or political issue within public debate (although there are also notable differences). For this reason, the overview that follows does not seek to be globally representative, but represents a preliminary foray into a complex and diverse field.

**Keywords:** pornography; sex education; health promotion; young people; sexual health

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## Introduction

> Pornography is a burning issue – the elephant in the room – a more significant issue with some groups than with others but students seem to have such easy access to this material and need to be taught to view it critically if they are going to access it and with a healthy lens that values their own well-being and the well-being of others. (South Australian teacher, cited in Johnson 2012)

Both popular and academic discussions of pornography have explored the question of sexually explicit texts as pedagogy. While many commentators and scholars have acknowledged the educational qualities of pornography, there is no universal consensus as to *what* porn teaches its consumers and *how* it works as an educator. This question of 'what porn teaches' is further complicated when 'porn consumers' are considered not as a homogeneous group, but as a diverse set of sub-groups, which includes same-sex-attracted and heterosexual people of diverse ages, genders, and cultural, political and religious affiliations (see McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008).

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Pornography is increasingly itself the subject of educational texts, with 'porn literacy' being debated as a potential addition to the secondary state school curriculum in the United Kingdom and Australia (Haste 2013; O'Brien 2013; Watt 2013). These debates on porn education tend to presume that young people aged under 18 should be provided with porn literacy education that promotes critical disengagement from pornographic texts. In contrast, sexuality education targeting adults has drawn on pornographic imagery to promote sexual learning – particularly in relation to safer-sex practices.

This article presents an overview of the field of 'porn as pedagogy' (which primarily addresses adults) and pedagogy about porn (which primarily addresses secondary school students). It is modest in scope, relying mainly on recent research and media reportage from Australasia, North America and the United Kingdom. These Anglophone countries have significant similarities in respect to the ways pornography is framed as a moral and/or political issue within public debate (although there are also notable differences). For this reason, the overview that follows does not seek to be globally representative, but represents a preliminary foray into a complex and diverse field.

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## Pornography, young people and formal education

Since the mid-1990s, online pornography has increasingly been framed as a risk to young people's well-being, and a potential risk to their sexual development (Flood 2009; McKee 2010). Researchers in Australia, New Zealand and the United States have proposed that pornography may be sought out by young people as a source of informal sexuality education (Tjaden 1988; Allen 2006, McKee 2007). These researchers argue that where other sources of education are lacking, young people may be motivated to seek out porn partly to gain access to detailed illustrations of genitalia or of bodies engaged in sexual acts (Kapsalis 1996; Kubicek et al. 2010). In addition, they may seek what Michelle Fine (1988) has termed a discourse of erotics, or instructions on how to initiate sexual activity and perform specific kinds of sex that may not be described or represented within school-based sex education (Ingham 2005; Allen 2006; Carmody 2009).

While some resources have been developed by third parties for use in school-based sexuality education (Crabbe and Corlett 2010; Johnson 2012; Bengry-Howell 2012), the discussion of porn in the classroom can be a high-risk proposition for teachers (Burton 2012; Haste 2013). This is also true in higher education settings. Porn is an object of inquiry within a range of disciplines (including Women's and Gender Studies, Media and Screen Studies, Law, Criminology and Psychology). As Kirkham and Skeggs put it:

> One need not personally 'like' commercial pornography or even artistic, avant-garde representations of sexuality to understand that analyzing it without condemning it plays an important role in developing feminist [and other kinds of] knowledge. (1996, 5)

Despite this, the study of sexually explicit texts in university classrooms remains controversial (Reading 2005; Smith 2009).

### Pedagogies of sexual identity

Porn can also be a significant source of education for sex/gender diverse young people, with a range of studies indicating that pornography is a significant source of explicit information that supports both sexual confidence and positive community formation for same-sex-attracted people (Waugh 1996; Ruddock and Kain 2006; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Kubichek et al. 2010). However, while porn is endorsed by some researchers as a source of 'positive' educational content for heterosexual adults (Watson and Smith 2012), it is widely considered to be a poor educator for young heterosexuals, particularly young men (Flood 2009; Crabbe and Corlett 2010; Johnson 2012).

Pornography has been criticized for teaching young heterosexuals to 'eroticise inequality' with respect to gender (Crabbe and Corlett 2010). In this context, pornography can be viewed in a continuum of other media representations, including advertising billboards, music videos, and websites, as part of a broader social tendency towards the 'pornographication' or 'sexualization' of popular culture (Attwood 2009; McNair 2012).

### Pedagogies of self-representation and sexual practices

Pornography has been criticized for 'normalizing' stylized or 'pornified' forms of corporeality and self-representation. This critique has focused primarily on female bodies, with both academic researchers and popular commentators linking the increased accessibility and popularity of pornography with trends in women's grooming (specifically in shaping or removing public hair) (Wolf 2003; Fitzpatrick 2007).

Health researchers, feminist scholars and popular commentators have also claimed that pornography has influenced young people's sexual repertoires in potentially damaging ways. Researchers have sought to link young men's consumption of pornography with 'aggressive' views towards women, although the definition of aggressive attitudes and behaviours has been challenged (McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). A number of studies in the fields of sexual health and psychology linked the consumption of porn to 'risky' sexual behaviours among young heterosexual men and women (for example, Tydén and Rogala 2004; Perrin et al. 2008; Štulhofer, Buško, and Landripet 2010). Critics of pornography have drawn on this literature to argue that porn has served as a 'bad educator' for these young people (Flood 2009).

However, other researchers and commentators have sought to question the link between young people's consumption of sexually explicit material and their actual sexual behaviours (McKee 2010; Hald et al. 2013). Or they have suggested that the key question for 'porn education' is not so much which practices young people have seen and can name (or want to try), but whether young people have access to other forms of education that promotes skills to help them navigate their sexual learning processes ethically and safely (Allen 2006; Carmody 2009). In the light of these concerns, it is worth considering whether simply adding a critique of porn to an existing sex and relationships education programme will address broader cultural inequities – particularly if other areas of the curriculum do not directly address questions of power, gender relations and sexual negotiation skills.

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**Pornography as (adult) sex education**

While discussions of porn as pedagogy for young people tend to assume poor educational outcomes, sexuality education for adults has drawn on pornographic images and texts to engage learners. Safer-sex education materials targeting gay men have drawn on pornographic imagery since the 1980s, and have been found to be highly effective in promoting acceptance of safer-sex practices (Scott-Sheldon and Johnson 2006; Leonard 2012). These images have attracted criticism from inside and outside the gay community. Some critics draw on radical feminist frameworks to argue that many gay pornographic images feature misogynist or violent language and imagery (Kendall 2004). Others have protested the overt eroticization of gay men's sexual cultures and practices, prompting the AIDS Federation of Australasia to develop specific policy guidelines in relation to sexually-explicit community health promotion (Leonard and Mitchell 2000). While the deliberate linking of explicit images and texts with sexual health information is relatively rare in health promotion and health education materials targeting young people, heterosexual adults, or same-sex-attracted women, one Australian sexual health promotion project targeting sexually adventurous women has adopted similar strategies (Albury, Constable, and May 2012). Although the project has been active for less than 12 months and is still being evaluated, it illustrates some of the ways that a 'community-driven' approach to sexual pedagogy and learning can engage with the tastes and practices of porn consumers. The media campaign was developed in consultation with a reference group of women drawn from Sydney alternative sex sub-cultures. The project website, iloveclaude, is modelled on the social media platform Tumblr, and combines 'found' images from soft-core pornography and erotica with commissioned photo-sets, interviews, expert advice and short videos focused on safer-sex and blood-play practices (AIDS Council 2012).

Some North American producers of commercial pornography have produced 'couples' videos that specifically offer sexually explicit instruction in particular sexual practices within the genre of 'educational porn' (for example, *Nina Hartley's Guide to Better Cunnilingus*; Hartley 1995). Others have also sought to incorporate safer-sex strategies, including the use of gloves, condoms, and 'dirty talk as sexual negotiation', into their videos, although this appears to be more common in explicitly queer/lesbian porn production (see Butler 2004; McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). In the United Kingdom, producer Anna Span has collaborated with health-promotion organization The Pleasure Project to produce heterosexual porn featuring condoms (Philpott 2004; Naish 2006; Knerr 2008). However, the use of condoms in both gay and straight pornography is generally not intended as safer-sex instruction, but as a sexual health precaution for performers (Albury 2013a).

Just as porn that features condoms is seen to model safer-sex within the gay men's community, bareback (or condom-less) porn is viewed as pedagogical in a negative sense – that is, it is suspected of eroticizing and thus promoting practices of unprotected anal intercourse. Consequently, sexual health organizations in Australia and the United Kingdom have sought to intervene in public conversations about barebacking in pornography, with the AIDS Council of NSW (Australia) requesting that sex-on-premises that seek to conform with safer-sex 'best-practice' codes do not broadcast bareback porn in their screening rooms (AIDS Council of NSW 2008, 5).

The authors of the Porn Laid Bare website, a collaboration between the Terrence Higgins Trust and the University of Sussex, observe that the interplay between men's consumption of bareback pornography and their sexual practices is complex, and:

> A simple 'ban bareback pornography' campaign risks alienating [men] who might enjoy consuming it (but equally be very clear about differentiating the act of barebacking in from their own sex lives) or could even further endorse or sensationalise bareback pornography as taboo, forbidden or exciting. (Mowlabocus 2012)

## What does porn literacy look like?

The question of what counts as 'porn literacy' is not straightforward and intersects with broader disciplinary debates about porn's effects on its users (see McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). As with other forms of media, there are multiple pedagogies deploying the term 'critical literacy', and these multiple approaches may have very different methods and aims. Within some educational frameworks, media literacy education may aim to 'inoculate' young people against particular kinds of media content, and in some cases involves 'denigrating all forms of media and computer culture' (Kellner and Share 2005, 372). This approach can lead to frustration for teachers when young people demonstrate an ability to correctly identify myths, stereotypes and 'bad role models' in commercial media imagery in the classroom, while simultaneously taking pleasure in what might be termed subaltern readings of these texts and images, particularly in relation to the 'coolness' or 'sexiness' of media content (Turnbull 1993; Albury 2013b).

Other forms of media education may encourage students to 'read' media texts in the ways they might read books, to develop ethical and aesthetic criteria for interpreting media, and/or to develop technical skills in media production (Kellner and Share 2005, 372). As Buckingham notes, media education programmes focused on non-pornographic texts often adopt 'a more student-centred perspective, which begins from young people's existing knowledge and experience of media, rather than the instructional imperatives of the teacher' (2008, 13). The difficulty for educators in the field of 'porn literacy', however, is that they may not legally distribute the object of study to their (minor) students, nor may they legally encourage students to develop alternative pornographic media as a means of developing literacy – a common strategy within mainstream media education. This means that porn education (for under-18s at least), neither permits close readings of actual explicit texts nor allows for direct discussions of specific texts.

As Allen (2011) suggests, young people publicly express interest in pornography for multiple reasons, which include (but are not limited to): seeking to satisfy curiosity regarding specific sexual practices, displaying sexual knowledge to peers, or conforming to normative gender expectations. In an ideal educational setting, porn literacy education might permit a dialogue that offers the opportunity for educators to learn more about young people's sexual cultures, and for both teachers and learners to extend their knowledge and understanding of the intersections between mediated representation and lived experiences of sex, sexuality, and gender.

However, most settings are less than ideal, and navigating the topic of pornography can be difficult or uncomfortable for teachers (Ayala et al. 2008;

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Allen 2011; Haste 2013). Consequently, a number of creatively 'indirect' strategies have been adopted by adults aiming to deliver porn education to young people, in the context of broader sex and relationships education programmes. These range from documentary videos promoting critical literacy (Crabbe and Corlett 2010) to instructional games (Bengry-Howell 2012). These tools may be accompanied by training and resources, or curriculum guidelines (Johnson 2012; Hewett, 2013). Such critiques or 'de-mystifications' of porn as a media genre are not unique to formal education. Popular media texts such as the short video *Porn Sex vs Real Sex* also promote critical interrogations of pornographic texts, deploying humorous and allegorical devices rather than literal depictions of genitalia or sex acts (KB Creative Lab 2013).

## Some reflections on porn and pedagogy

It has not been possible to fully do justice to the range of dissent and debate around porn *as* education, and education *about* pornography. Men and women, boys and girls are framed quite differently as 'students' of porn, as are heterosexual and same-sex-attracted people. While this review has primarily focused on examples of research and practice from North America, Australia and the United Kingdom, it is clear that different cultures (both national and global) have their own relationship to pornography as pedagogy (for example, see Ramalgun 2012). It is likely that there may be quite different conversations about what porn teaches, and what could be taught about porn, within different cultural and sub-cultural contexts.

In their study of the popular reporting of young people's changing sexual repertoires (specifically the 'fellatio epidemic') in North America, Curtis and Hunt note the radical changes in broader cultural views with respect to young women's sexuality since the 1970s. They also draw attention to the changes in hierarchies of sexual intimacy and sexual repertoires that have occurred in the past half century, noting that:

> oral sex has been relocated in the regime of sexual practice to the realm of pre- or non-marital sex – 'outercourse' – and its quality as an expression of commitment and mutuality for the marital relation has been largely eliminated. (Curtis and Hunt 2007,16)

Curtis and Hunt suggest that some of anxiety adults experience in relation to young people's interest in 'alternative' sexual practices such as oral sex may stem from a broader anxiety in response to young people's increased capacity to publicly express sexual curiosity (and sexual adventurism) without fear of being incarcerated by adult authorities for being 'wayward' or 'incorrigable' (2007, 24).

As Kellner and Share argue in their review of prevalent methods and approaches in critical media literacy education:

> cultivating literacies involves attaining competencies in practices in contexts that are governed by rules and conventions. Literacies are socially constructed in educational and cultural practices involved in various institutional discourses and practices. (2005, 369)

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Conversations about porn literacy and porn as sex education (particularly with respect to the question of what young people learn from porn) should also be understood as conversations about changing cultural rules and conventions regarding sexual self-representation and sexual practice. Academic research to date does not present a unified picture of what porn teaches, or what porn audiences might learn from it. While debates are sparked around the inclusion of porn literacy programmes within school-based sex and relationships education, there is no clear model of what 'best-practice' might look like in this field, or who might be best suited to deliver it. Further, where other areas of school curriculum do not challenge sex/gender inequality, or seek to actively promote what Allen (2011) has termed sexual/social justice, it is unlikely that education programmes which focus exclusively on pornography will effect significant change.

As Buckingham notes, contemporary 'mainstream' media literacy education 'seeks to begin with … students … existing tastes and pleasures, rather than assuming that these are merely invalid or "ideological"' (2008, 14). While sexuality education targeting adults (particularly same-sex-attracted men) currently takes this approach to pornography, education targeting heterosexual young people does not. I suggest this difference does not solely stem from adult concerns regarding representations of gendered inequality within pornography, but from the anxieties alluded to by Curtis and Hunt (2007), regarding young people's changing engagements with new sexual practices and sexual cultures.

Future research (and practical inquiry) into pornography and/as sex education might therefore interrogate the ways that debates about porn education intersect with other debates around young people's sexual practices, sexual self-representation and sexual knowledge. Rather than seeking to set universal definitions regarding what porn *really* teaches (or what young people and adults *should* know about porn), this line of questioning might seek to take account of the ways that differences in sexual tastes and cultures might impact on audiences' reception of pornographic texts. It might also seek to understand how young people's readings of pornography (and their reception of porn education) can reshape the broader curriculum of formal sex and relationships education. This interrogation would not rule out explicit critiques of misogynistic, homophobic or racist tropes within pornography, but might also offer the capacity to open up critically productive conversations about the boundaries between adult sexual knowledge and young people's sexual learning; and the ways popular and institutional discourses define particular forms of sexuality, sexual identity, and sex/gender expression as 'legitimate' (or 'illegitimate') knowledge for young people.

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