

The perils of PowerPoint

Like many faculty members, I use PowerPoint in my lectures. When I first began using it, I found that students appreciated the seductive elegance of its format and the ease with which it facilitated their note taking. I appreciated that it was a vast improvement over my overheads with their impenetrable handwriting.

At first, my relationship with PowerPoint was quite satisfying. Everything seemed to be going smoothly as they often do in the early part of a courtship. Lately, however, we've hit a bit of a rocky patch with me doubting the wisdom of continuing our relationship.

The first seed of doubt came at an international conference I attended last year in Britain. When one of the presenters apologized for not having a PowerPoint presentation, he was greeted with thunderous applause. At this gathering, to not use PowerPoint was seen as an act of defiance. Instead, what he did was have a conversation with his audience. It gave us a chance to recover from the wounds of bullets we endured from presentations past.

According to Microsoft, more than 250 million computers have PowerPoint and 30 million PowerPoint presentations are made every day. That is a strong indictment of how this little program has affected the way we communicate ideas in the university.

Teaching is an art. It not only requires a solid grasp of knowledge but an ability to communicate in ways that encourage our students to think.

My complaint with PowerPoint is that as teachers it transforms our thinking, how we organize our



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material and ultimately how our students think. While PowerPoint is unrelentingly visual, teaching is most often verbal. Students learn about our subject matter not necessarily by rote memory of bullets but by the interplay of knowledge among text, professor and student.

Good teaching is about reasoning, explaining, questioning and constructing arguments. It's a journey. Rather than seeing learning as this complex process, PowerPoint reduces learning to the invisible logic of the bullet. Often during a lecture, I will recall something important that isn't in my presentation. I've noticed a trend that if it is not on a slide, apparently students will not think it is important. PowerPoint de-skills our students and primes them to see the presentation as authoritative and the lecture as an adjunct to it. Have we become an accessory to a computer program?

It is not surprising that PowerPoint might appeal to students. Its evocative visuals have the same grammar as a hyper-real video game: colourful slides fly in, fade out and dissolve, complete with sound effects. (Though

why anyone would want to accentuate a point with the sound of squealing tires, I will never know.)

PowerPoint is also an impoverished form of communication. As Edward Tufte writes in *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, the amount of data that can be put on a slide is shockingly low. "The PP slide typically shows 40 words, which is about eight seconds-worth of silent reading material," he writes. Presentations made with PowerPoint are shaped by the demand of the software to limit the amount of words on a slide. But much of the teaching that goes on in a university is complex and requires detail to ensure clarity. Sometimes less is not more.

For better or worse, PowerPoint or some version of it will likely be around for some time. I am not suggesting a complete repudiation of it because it is not without its charms. If used as a road map of one's arguments or to enhance them through visual images, it can be a powerful pedagogical aid. In social sciences and humanities, PowerPoint can be useful to show video clips and I know in the sciences it is used effectively for animations.

Thinking about the use of PowerPoint in the classroom invites us to think about how we teach and how we conceive learning. I've learned that PowerPoint can be both a help as well as a hindrance. Perhaps my relationship with it is salvageable after all.

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