

Can PowerPoint be Saved? We Think So!

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Abstract

How do you stop ‘Death by PowerPoint’? We encourage faculty to turn off the bullets and rely instead on each other and their best teaching instincts when creating PowerPoint shows. The result? Enthusiastic faculty are turning boring slideshows into classroom activities energized with storytelling, humor, interactivity, and students are engaged!

The PowerPoint Crisis in Higher Education

The common criticism cited by Tufte (2003), Norvig (2003) and others is that PowerPoint is a linear, passive medium that discourages discourse, inhibits spontaneity, and emphasizes form over content. As PowerPoint transitioned from a business application to a ubiquitous classroom presentation tool, these criticisms have grown louder. Despite this, more and more faculty are adopting it as a presentation medium for teaching. PowerPoint’s intuitive interface and convenient bulleted outline format makes it – like Learning Management Systems - a perfect starting point for faculty adoption of instructional technology. However, it also makes it easy to simply copy lecture notes into slides, and thereby miss the opportunity to learn best practices for using PowerPoint to engage learners and improve learning. As a result, college students are now falling victim to the same fate as bored business audiences: Death by PowerPoint. Students, however, are speaking out. Their opinions are surfacing in listservs, instructor evaluations, and websites, and their collective voices question why instructors subject them to this disastrous misuse of technology and/or why they should bother attending classes if everything they need can be read from a PowerPoint handout. Some have even left notes for their professors imploring, “*Stop using PowerPoint!*”

As faculty developers wedded to a ‘glass half full’ outlook, we appreciate PowerPoint’s innate ability to entice faculty to give up chalk and blackboards and try out classroom technology; for this reason we feel that much would be lost and little gained by banishing PowerPoint. Not only is it unlikely that we can convince faculty to give up PowerPoint, but we believe that PowerPoint is well worth saving. Inspired by innovator Cliff Atkinson’s book, “PowerPoint Beyond Bullets,” and PowerPoint ‘virtuoso’ Stanford Law Professor Lawrence Lessig, we are convinced that PowerPoint is actually one of the most flexible, dynamic, and useful instructional tools available in higher education. The solution lies in finding strategies that convince faculty to give up linear, static presentations in favor of more engaging, dynamic instructional interventions.

A Change in Perspective

Recently, Internet applications have evolved from simple storage and delivery systems for static information into adaptive, collaboratively-constructed information systems. The term Web 2.0 is often used to refer collectively to these interactive, social software applications. Perhaps, using Web 2.0 as a model, faculty developers and instructional designers could similarly shift faculty thinking about PowerPoint, changing the prevailing view of PowerPoint as a static, text-based presentation medium into that of a collaboratively developed, engagement-based multimedia. By intentionally fostering a 'PowerPoint 2.0' framework, we could provide faculty with a new cultural context for thinking about and creating PowerPoint applications for the classroom. To some extent we are seeing this occur on our campus, and although it is always hard to transplant one faculty development success story to an entirely different learning environment, we believe the strategies we are implementing to bring about this change might be adaptable to other schools and Universities.

Background

Four years ago, we had a fairly basic approach to teaching PowerPoint to our faculty. We offered a PowerPoint beginners' workshop that emphasized the standard rules of visual design (e.g., no more than four bullet lines and no more than six words per line). Most of the rules came from the only available literature, which was oriented to the business world. Our advanced PowerPoint workshops showed faculty how to add images, hyperlinks, and movies into their slideshows.

Simultaneously, we were administering a multi-year faculty development grant program designed to provide faculty with the time, equipment, and mentoring to explore instructional technology. The grants were for modest amounts: \$1,000 to pay for a student mentor for 100 hours, \$3,000 to provide faculty with equipment or a course release so they could devote time to learning a technology, or a combination of the two. The grant approval process involved a peer-review by other faculty, mostly early adopters with advanced computer skills. Early in the process we discovered that these peers were very critical of faculty looking for a mentor or course release to develop PowerPoint presentations. "PowerPoint's easy; anyone can develop PowerPoint!" they argued. As faculty developers, we strongly supported the grant applicants on this issue and won over their peer reviewers...and we're glad we did. This pairing of students and faculty on PowerPoint projects, combined with course releases, produced some very startling and innovative results, first identified in one of our faculty members' final grant reports:

To the extent my PowerPoint presentations have been successful, it is because I do not always use them to put up lecture outlines. I use them to emphasize important points, to provide visual representation of data, and to add illustrations to narratives. Listening to a lecture is a difficult experience; human beings are not designed to receive information in this

way. PowerPoint should be used to make the class less predictable rather than more predictable (Anderson, 2004).

Intrigued, we asked this faculty member to present his ideas and demonstrate his unique approach to his peers at one of our campus-wide PowerPoint seminars. It just so happened that another faculty/student mentor pair were participating in that seminar. Afterwards, we solicited feedback from the student mentor about his reactions to the PowerPoint examples. He was extremely enthusiastic, and said he hoped that other faculty would adopt a similar approach with PowerPoint. Encouraged by what we had seen and heard, we changed our entire approach to teaching PowerPoint.

Project Implementation

We are implementing a multiple-prong approach designed to initiate a PowerPoint cultural change on our campus. This approach includes:

- Fostering faculty-student PowerPoint collaborations, faculty-faculty collaborations, and faculty-faculty development collaborations.
- Emphasizing “Who is the Learner?” in faculty development materials and workshops, in order to model and encourage instructional design practices that are engaging and specifically targeted to the audience.
- Consistently reinforcing our new PowerPoint cultural framework through the careful use of language, demonstrations, and in our support and instructional materials.

Collaborative Learning

Collaboration is the cornerstone of our strategy. We have created a full spectrum of collaborative opportunities for faculty in order to enhance the creation and spread of knowledge, ideas, and innovations relating to PowerPoint. Facets of our collaboration strategy include:

Faculty/Student Collaboration

Student mentors or assistance – Although our grant has ended, we hope to secure new funds in order to providing more student mentors. We feel this was an essential component for encouraging innovative PowerPoint development and is worth funding again.

Direct student feedback – Several of our faculty have begun to ask students for “thoughtful critiques” on classroom PowerPoint presentations, both during and at the conclusion of their courses, and we encourage other faculty to do so as well. This valuable feedback can help fine-tune and revise presentations. One faculty member even assigns a PowerPoint scribe in his class, a student whose role is to jot down slide numbers and revision notes during class presentations. In doing so, this faculty member inadvertently is bringing the entire class into the development process.

Faculty/Faculty Collaboration

One of our strongest strategies may be the creation of opportunities for faculty to collaborate and learn from each other. Sharing innovation through networking is a key component for the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1995).

Faculty presenters - Whenever possible, we start PowerPoint workshops by having PowerPoint 2.0 faculty demonstrate their PowerPoint shows and explain their teaching methods, followed by step-by-step technical instruction.

Occasionally, we provide a small stipend to faculty presenters, but realize this isn't necessary, as we find most of our faculty are eager and highly motivated--they want to share their shows with colleagues.

Peer feedback – This idea came to us through one of our faculty members, Dr. Raymond McGivney, Professor of Mathematics, an opinion leader close to retirement, who has just discovered PowerPoint. On his own, he had been informally soliciting feedback from his colleagues, but wanted a more formal feedback process established for this, so he worked with us to set up Faculty Learning Circles: one hour sharing sessions where faculty can get feedback from each other (and possibly) from their students. Our faculty development center kicked off this initiative with a one and a half hour presentation by Dr. McGivney entitled, “[Mis]-Adventures of a PowerPoint Neophyte.”

Faculty/Faculty Development Collaboration

JIT one-on-one expert assistance – We have found that faculty often begin the move from static PowerPoint to interactive PowerPoint because of student feedback or peer encouragement. As these interactive shows typically incorporate advanced PowerPoint techniques, faculty still require ongoing technical instruction. Our roles, however, have become more facilitative, providing less standardized instruction and more individualized consultative services. Faculty often come to us looking for a technical solution to a pedagogical issue, but can't identify one because they don't know what technology is available out there that could provide a solution. We have been hard-pressed to name a time when we couldn't adapt PowerPoint as their solution, typically by employing a non-linear format. Using our technical expertise, we help them realize whatever PowerPoint idea they dream up (although admittedly, this is often a bit of a challenge!).

Examples include:

- ePortfolios for our Dance Division.
- Hyperlinked image menus to allow for student input and choice over subject matter (The instructor was adamant that she did not want a 'linear' presentation.).
- An animated media show designed to run in sync with an orchestral production, demonstrating timing and rhythm to elementary school students.

- Class preparation – having students facilitate in-class activities, using PowerPoint and digital tablet pens.

A word of caution here: Teaching these strategies to faculty requires staff with a breadth of technical and depth of instructional PowerPoint expertise, something to consider in the hiring process.

We find that collaboration encourages faculty to tap into their own best teaching instincts. It inspires them to go beyond pre-formatted PowerPoint slideshows and to develop their own unique PowerPoint style specifically adapted to instruction. The resulting applications are customized to teaching objectives, specific to particular disciplines, and reflective of unique teaching styles.

Instructional Design

Although we use many of the principles incorporated in a basic ADDIE instructional design model, we place particular emphasis on identifying and understanding today's learner, as we feel the culture clash inherent in having an aging faculty body teaching millennial students must be addressed. Since most faculty are probably not going to be interested in learning formal instructional design process, we indirectly address this in a few subtle ways:

Role modeling for faculty – The materials used in our instruction specifically target faculty, who are generally aging baby boomers. One of our PowerPoint workshop exercises featured movies, animations, and visuals from the 1960s and the effect on faculty participants was telling - laughter, fun, and *engagement*. It is our hope that - perhaps with a more direct hint or two - our faculty take that lesson home with them and apply it by selecting PowerPoint materials relevant to today's Net Gen student.

Fostering an understanding about the Millennial Student – Regardless of the topic, our seminars are threaded with references to the expectations and culture of a generation that has never known life without the Internet, cell phones, or instant messaging. We have brought in guest speakers to address and highlight the impact Net Gen students are having on the traditional classroom. We encourage faculty to get inside the heads of their students in order to understand their frustration and non-responsiveness to passive teaching styles. We encourage faculty to examine ways to reach students “where they live” and speak to them in their native digital tongue.

Encouraging the adoption of mass media techniques - We observed that many of the presentations being developed by our PowerPoint 2.0 faculty simulated popular culture media models that appeal to today's student, albeit with more substantive content.

Examples of this include:

- Pop-up videos - This cultural phenomenon, used extensively by the cable station VH1, features behind the scenes information, trivia, and comedy 'tidbits' that 'pop up' as balloons over music videos. Since this visual

language is familiar to most undergraduates, adopting it may serve to make learning more relevant and engaging.

- Stephen Colbert's "The Word" on Comedy Central - Colbert uses a background text behind his editorials that acts as a second voice. We have seen faculty use a second voice or alter-ego in PowerPoint shows to play devil's advocate or translator in the classroom. In the latter case, this second voice translates academic language into everyday words and images that are easier to understand and familiar to undergraduates. Again, this may help make content more relevant and accessible to learners.
- MTV - Today's students are comfortable with dual encoded messages. For example, they are capable of interpreting a visual images juxtaposed on musical lyrics, synthesizing the two sources of information into a cohesive story. Lawrence Lessig and Dick Hardt have perfected this use of slideware in their lectures and presentations, and we share their techniques with faculty.
- Commercials and Digital Movies - Marketers are experts when it comes to conveying a targeted message in thirty seconds or less. We encourage faculty to watch commercials and other types of animation to learn digital storytelling techniques that can be applied in their classrooms. We encourage them to use this, not to convey course content, which clearly takes more than thirty seconds, but to engage student's attention so they can focus on longer explanations.

While some might critique such strategies as "edu-tainment," we believe that there is no reason why higher education should refrain from using models that clearly engage students. Rather than view this as edu-tainment, we consider it an application of the first principle of instructional design: Know Your Learner.

Reinforcement

As faculty developers, we consciously reinforce this new PowerPoint framework throughout our faculty development programs and our PowerPoint instruction. This reinforcement takes many forms, including:

New workshop design – We no longer teach traditional PowerPoint basics in our faculty development program. Instead, we start by showing faculty how to turn off bullets and the automatic *Advance on Click* feature, which frees them to think about PowerPoint in interactive, dynamic terms. If time permits, we have them build simple non-linear quizzes. Our advanced PowerPoint workshops are short one-hour seminars that focus on one or two non-linear teaching techniques, and we market them under the theme *PowerPoint Beyond Bullets*. These have proven to be very popular offerings.

Providing ready-to-go templates – At some point, we stumbled across a website featuring “Parade of Games,” a grant-funded project that provides free interactive PowerPoint templates to non-profit, educational organizations. We provide faculty with these templates, as well as all of our own instructional materials and templates, so that faculty can practice using them after the workshop. Since the templates are all interactive and are readily available, we are effectively encouraging them to skip the bullets.

Providing a concrete list of instructional ideas – Over the years, we have compiled a list of PowerPoint ideas collected from our campus and other campuses, and we provide our faculty with this list. Some of these ideas are quite simple (e.g., using a PowerPoint slide with music to settle down students in a large lecture hall), and others are more complicated, such as leaving blanks in a slide in order to induce students to attend class. These ideas are rarely about bulleted slideshows.

Immersion learning – Creating a new PowerPoint conceptual framework and teaching non-linear and other advanced technical skills can also be accomplished through an immersion learning experience. A year ago, we offered a two-day Faculty Institute devoted entirely to PowerPoint. Day One brought novice users easily up to speed using text and images in PowerPoint, thus creating confidence, enthusiasm, and momentum. Day Two incorporated rich media and a variety of non-linear, interactive techniques designed to showcase the full range of PowerPoint in the classroom.

Deliberate language – Instead of using the words *slideshows*, *bullets*, and *slides*, we have begun using vocabulary like *stories*, *movies*, *narratives*, *frames*, and *activities*. This subtly introduces a new framework for thinking about PowerPoint, one that steers faculty away from text models and toward rich media and active learning.

Evidence of Change

By working with faculty across the curriculum and across our diverse schools and colleges, we believe we have begun to transform PowerPoint culture on our campus. We have identified several key changes occurring, that are now largely being driven by faculty, rather than our initiatives:

PowerPoint is becoming a collaborative, campus-wide conversation that includes faculty from all disciplines. We hope to expand this conversation to include more student voices.

We are successfully seeing a trend in our faculty view of PowerPoint as a non-linear presentation medium. We believe this is because our PowerPoint 2.0 faculty are raising the bar for their colleagues across campus.

Faculty are beginning to understand PowerPoint creation as a continuum. First generation users may start with text-based slide shows, but later evolve into second generation PowerPoint users, moving beyond bullets and developing PowerPoint multimedia shows, visual narratives, and interactive activities designed to engage students and increase learning. We observe that shifts in thinking about PowerPoint often

parallel a reevaluation of the lecture-based instructional model. As one instructor put it, “PowerPoint makes me think about what is really important in my message, and how I can best convey it to my students.”

As faculty developers, we continue to encourage our faculty to develop PowerPoint shows that engage students, foster active learning, and motivate students.

Conclusion

All college campuses are suffering from PowerPoint outrage. A quick Google search will bring back hundreds, if not thousands of hits, many of them student complaints about having to endure classes where slide after slide of bullet points are read to them verbatim. The PowerPoint crisis, while not unique to faculty, is worsening instruction in the classroom, not improving it. This misuse of a potentially engaging tool has led some students to beg professors to “Quit Using PowerPoint,” and caused some within the teaching ranks to conclude that using PowerPoint in the classroom means that pedagogy has taken a backseat to technology (“See! We told you so!”).

Our experience tells us that this crisis can be remedied. PowerPoint is a dynamic, flexible, and creative tool, one that when used effectively and in accordance to good instructional design, can engage students in the learning process and promote active learning. We believe that by using diffusion of innovation and faculty development models, we can change the cultural perception of how PowerPoint should be used in instruction by faculty. In doing so, we believe we may collaboratively discover the higher education models so sorely lacking in PowerPoint literature and design today.

If PowerPoint 2.0 isn’t the right name, let’s find another one. A conceptual change in how faculty can view and think about PowerPoint needs a name and it needs a campaign. It is imperative we find the solution to the PowerPoint crisis in higher education: we owe it to our faculty and we owe it to our students.

Suggested Audience

Instructional Designers, Instructional Technologists, Technical Support, Faculty Developers.

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