

Teaching Tip  
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Perils of Powerpoint

*Teaching Tips is brought to you by Dan Madigan (The Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology). If you have a teaching tip to share or if you would like to comment on any of the teaching tips, please write to Dan Madigan at [dmadiga@bgsu.edu](mailto:dmadiga@bgsu.edu)*

In last week's teaching tip, I described ways in which faculty can enhance their effectiveness as a teacher and consequently benefit student learning by using presentation tools such as PowerPoint. What I didn't write about was how one should also be cautious about using presentation tools before knowing the perils of those same tools. Much has been written lately about the perils of using PowerPoint (the most widely-used presentation tool used today in both the private and public milieu). Some critics of PowerPoint even suggest that PowerPoint presentations kill creativity in a classroom and stifle student learning. While I think that such critics are extreme in their view, since I believe that presentation tools definitely have a place in the classroom, I do know faculty and students who think that PowerPoint presentations by both faculty and students have been overused in the classroom, and in many cases... "boring."

So, what are the perils of PowerPoint? McDaniel, T., & McDaniel, K. (2005) recently wrote a piece for the National Teaching and Learning Forum newsletter that captures the flavor of the dangers of using PowerPoint. It is useful reading so that we learn how not to create a presentation.

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By T. McDaniel and K. McDaniel

"College professors everywhere are incorporating PowerPoint presentations into their classroom lectures. Faculty often pressure their deans to make every classroom a "smart classroom," and those fuddy-duddy faculty too slow to embrace this quickly-emerging technology are considered Luddites, resisters to change, out of step with modern student expectations. Technology can be a boon to pedagogy, but it is not without its perils. Before jumping headlong into the rushing tide of PowerPoint presentations, consider these cautions and criticisms about this popular teaching tool:

1) It's Inflexible.

When you use PowerPoint to convey information and ideas, it limits not only the content you can convey, but also the pace at which you present. If a student has a question (which the format of PowerPoint discourages anyway), the presenter may lose the flow of the PowerPoint in trying to answer it. If the student's question requires a quick jump ahead to a later point, the presenter will (if the program will allow it) have to scroll through upcoming points to address it. This can lead to confusion and a sense of disorder for both the presenter and the students. If the presenter has included too much information on the slides, students may delay the presentation by insisting that they "haven't finished"

copying everything down. If you find out that your audience has a different level of knowledge than you expected (for example, if they didn't do the reading they were supposed to), the presentation cannot easily be adapted to fit the new situation. What all of these "ifs" demon!

strate is that there's insufficient flexibility in the presentation form to allow for any surprises-those wonderful "teachable moments" that energize a lesson.

## 2) It's Risky.

How many times have you seen a PowerPoint presentation where some technical difficulty

- a) made it impossible to start the presentation on time?
- b) caused the presenter to lose the presentation entirely and end up fumbling halfheartedly through the presentation?
- c) made it difficult to change the "slides," making every transition a long or clumsy process?
- d) created a problem with the sequencing of points such that the presenter lost his or her place?
- e) all of the above?

Technology is a wonderful thing, but its use also opens up all kinds of possible delays and technical difficulties. The real trouble with PowerPoint technology is that the presenter becomes too dependent on it and often cannot simply abandon the technological "enhancement" to perform the lesson anyway when technical difficulties arise, as they invariably do.

## 3) It's a Crutch.

PowerPoint often serves as a crutch that prevents academics from developing real teaching skills. This is particularly a problem for academics who have spent most of their training in relatively isolated activities (researching in labs and libraries and then writing up their research) and who often have introverted tendencies. Instead of having to develop a pedagogy that engages the class at some level, instead of having to learn to communicate ideas to the individuals within the class, the professor can spend hours laying out a PowerPoint presentation that resembles a scholarly publication more than a lesson and that presents the information in a way that stifles communication between teacher and students. This is "presentation," not teaching.

## 4) It's Boring.

One of our students talks about PowerPoint classes as a "Zone-Out Zone." Not only is it easy for students to zone out during a presentation, it's often actually difficult for them to stay focused and attentive. This occurs for several reasons. First, a PowerPoint presentation seems to signal to students that they will not be necessary for the next 50 minutes or so, that their presence is purely as an audience, and as a result many students automatically disengage even at the very outset. (Having the lights out provides a cue.)

Second, presenters often put all of the salient points of the presentation on the slides, bullet-pointed for clarity-and sometimes they even distribute a handout of the information on each slide. Why does a student need to listen to the presenter read through each of these, even if there is a longer explanation? The pacing seems to slow down painfully; the students never have to figure out for themselves what the key ideas or points are; they have become merely scribes, copying down information. No matter how many "cool graphics" you have, if they don't relate to the material (and are just "frills"), students will tune out everything of substance.

#### 5) It's Style without Substance.

The stylish presentation that PowerPoint offers often occurs at the expense of substance. Instead of spending time researching and studying the content, the presenter spends hours figuring out how to have the bullet points "fly" in. Examples end up watered down because of technological limitations or the lack of an appropriate graphic. Complex ideas are reduced to bullet points and clever images which don't allow for nuance, multiple perspectives or definitions, or points of contention. Excessive stylish features slow the pace of the lesson and reduce the amount of material that can be conveyed effectively.

Even the best PowerPoint presentation is impressive not because of the insights and ideas conveyed, but because of the skilled use of technology it represents. In thinking about whether or not a PowerPoint presentation was effective, people will often focus on the technologies used, the frills and graphics, the smoothness with which the technology functioned. This is the last thing you want students to be getting out of your lesson-that you, the teacher, are good with technology.

#### Like Any Tool . . .

While PowerPoint can be a great addition to a teacher's pedagogical repertoire, it is no magic bullet guaranteed to make professors better (and more impressive) teachers. Like any tool, it can be misused or abused, and when that happens teaching effectiveness may be undermined instead of enriched. Effective pedagogy means knowing the benefits of any given teaching tool. Those who know the "perils of PowerPoint" are most likely to avoid its pitfalls.