

Presenting with PowerPoint

Love it or loathe it, the Microsoft Office presentation tool has effectively ensconced itself in higher education as the preferred medium for both student and faculty presentations.

Academic conferences are dominated by them (punctuated by the inevitable incompatibility problems, connection failures and disk corruption crises) just as sales pitches are and increasingly, teaching faculty are adopting them as a way of adding visual aids and notes to their lectures and seminar groups.

PowerPoint is a deceptively easy application to use. Deceptive, that is, because it is so easy to use badly, as anyone who has stumbled from a presentation in a confused blur with their head reeling and their eyes spinning will know only too well. For anyone still wary of unleashing this powerful yet disruptive force upon their classrooms, here is a short guide to making the most out of PowerPoint in lectures.

1. Be careful in your choice of design

The number of possible designs for the background of PowerPoint slides is infinite. The number upon which written words will stand out clearly and visibly is very small.

Choose a design that makes it easier to read the text, rather than harder. Remember that black on white may not be the most legible combination for students with certain dyslexic conditions. If you have such a student in your classes, try to discover whether they find it easier to read against a particular coloured background (green, blue, pink...).

Likewise avoid overly vibrant or jazzy patterns. They tire the eye and distract the reader. You want students to be noting your words of wisdom, not the way the patterns in the design appear to move if you shake your head.

2. Stick to a single design

At least for each presentation! Talks where the background changes constantly look incoherent and confused. Just as every lecture will have a single theme linking the different parts of the hour, so the visual effects accompanying it should be linked by a common theme. Using a single design throughout will give a sense of unity and flow to the presentation.

3. Don't be afraid of blank space

Slides are clearer and easier to read and understand if they have just a few items on them. A busy, cluttered slide, filled with graphics, text and animations is just baffling and unpleasant to read.

Don't try to put every word of your lecture on to the slides. Instead, use them to highlight key points or to list headings you wish to talk around. As long as it is indicated to students that they will need to make notes of what you're saying, rather than just what's up on the screen, this shouldn't pose a problem.

4. Just because we have the technology, it doesn't mean we should use it!

PowerPoint includes some very entertaining features: fancy fonts, mind-boggling animations, humorous images, etc. Resist the temptation to use them! Or, if the lure of spinning Clip Art proves irresistible, use it sparingly, to add emphasis not to detract from an otherwise boring class.

If you use animations to make text appear on the screen, stick to the same one or two throughout. Again, this re-enforces the unity and coherence of the presentation, and it is much easier on the eye and brain for your audience.

The use of images and graphics can, of course, add considerably to a presentation but, in a learning context, they add most value when they help students to understand or grasp the point being made. If your slides are filled with pictures but you're still having to draw diagrams on a board, it's time to re-think your approach to images on PowerPoint.

5. Less is more

As mentioned earlier, PowerPoint slides are an aid to delivering a presentation, not a substitute for it. Limit the number of slides you show in any lecture session. 8 to 12 is probably optimal for an hour's class, and no-one can get through more than 20 unless they're very empty or very repetitive. Trying to blast through dozens of slides will make you rushed and leave your students wondering what you're saying but without the time to ask.

6. Stay in charge!

All this adds up to a simple reminder: it's still your show. Don't feel that you have to follow the agenda or the order laid down by your PowerPoint presentation. Talk off-topic; encourage student interruptions and questions if you want them; go back to previous slides to make a point; if you feel you're losing control, just hit the off button.

You have the Power – that's the real Point!

Printed from: <http://info.emeraldinsight.com/teaching/insights/powerpoint.htm>
on Saturday July 26th, 2008