

Repurposing PowerPoint Presentations (and Other Technologies) for Use in the Student-Centered Classroom

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As a child who grew up watching westerns on Saturday mornings and reading the works of authors like Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, I developed an affinity for stampede scenes. The action was unparalleled as cowhands, blinded and choking on the swirling dust, struggled mightily to restore order to the pandemonium created by cattle rushing to some unknown destination. Today, as a college administrator charged with assisting my institution in the acquisition of technology and its use in the classroom, I have a better understanding of the emotions those cowhands must have experienced, for I have a suspicion that higher education is in the midst of a stampede of its own, that we are rushing to incorporate digital technology into instruction with no idea of our pedagogical destination. I fear that in our haste to be on-the-cutting-edge, we run the risk of forcing faculty members to revert to teacher-centered models of instruction, the old stand-and-deliver, lecture models, rather than the student-centered models we know to be more effective, that we are encouraging a return to higher education's pre-Gutenberg roots where presentation technologies have replaced the book as the locus of instructors' authority.

In his article, "PowerPoint, No! Cyberspace, Yes," which recently appeared in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, Tom Creed, a Professor of Psychology at Saint John's University, notes that "digital technology can enhance our students' learning, but only if our goals for our students' learning drive its use." Creed is correct. The use of technology in the classroom must be driven by instructional need, used to support instructional goals. Faculty members cannot simply be given a laundry list of technologies that a school supports and ordered to incorporate those elements into their courses. Rather, they must be asked to fundamentally re-examine every aspect of their instruction and course content, asked to think not in terms of what they plan to teach in a given class or lesson, but what they want students to learn. Then and only then can instructors be asked to envision innovative, creative ways in which technology can be utilized to help students accomplish those learning goals.

As Creed notes, the proliferation of PowerPoint presentations being designed by instructors to support their lectures is a classic example of technology misused. At the current stage in their technological evolution, the vast majority of faculty members are essentially using PowerPoint presentations as glorified overheads. The true irony is that overheads are probably the more appropriate technology for those in-

structors, and far less expensive to design, produce, implement, and support. That does not mean that PowerPoint presentations are inherently evil, that they should be banished to the storage closet and forced to languish, unloved, amidst dusty film strips and 16mm films. Nor does it mean that instructors should cease their attempts to utilize digital technology in instruction. It does mean, however, that instructors must be very conscious of the way they employ any technology in the classroom, and that they must have pedagogically sound, student-centered objectives to guide its use. PowerPoint presentations (and other technologies) are tools, and as such they are neither student-centered nor teacher-centered. It is the way they are used that dictates their focus.

Our instructional design efforts at Darton College have led to what I believe is a good example of PowerPoint presentations used in a very student-centered way. Our recent development of an English Composition I course that can be delivered by multiple distance learning technologies and in which instructional technologies are deeply embedded led to the development of a series of short (3 to 5 minute) PowerPoint presentations designed to emphasize key points in the traditional classroom through a series of mini-lectures. Each presentation was then ported to HTML and added to the class World Wide Web site with the lecture portion of the presentation available as a RealAudio file. The presentations can be accessed by students in any of the college's English Composition I classes at any time from any computer with World Wide Web access. As a result, the same presentations that are delivered in class also serve as effective reinforcers for our students. They are also an integral part of our stand-alone Web-based class, providing critical, multi-modal learning opportunities to students over what is often a text-laden medium. The real issue facing colleges and universities is not that some technologies are more student-centered or teacher-centered than others, but that we must seek student-centered ways to use all technologies, must become "educentric" in our view of educational technologies rather than "technocentric." PowerPoint may have inherent limitations, may have been designed for business rather than education, but it can be repurposed for use in the student-centered classroom given an imaginative instructor and a student need.

Recently, a colleague asked me if I could name a class that would not benefit from instructional technology in any of its current forms, and with tongue planted firmly in cheek I responded, "Sure, swimming." Admittedly, I was not feel-

ing quite so smug when my colleague, who is, himself, a very innovative user of technology in the classroom, pointed out that multimedia and video presentations could be used very effectively to teach student-swimmers various strokes and techniques and, if students were taped while they swam, instructional technology could help them monitor and critique their performance. Ultimately, I conceded the argument to my colleague, agreeing that perhaps students in a swimming class might benefit from the use of instructional technology, but in conceding that minor point, proved a major one: the effectiveness of instructional technology and its appropriateness in any given course is ultimately determined by the instructor.

Technologies change rapidly; the core principles of good instruction do not. As administrators, we must resist the urge to encourage faculty to incorporate technology into instruction for technology's sake, must remember that technology offers a means to an end but should never be considered an end in itself. With UCLA set to become the first U.S. college to make class web pages mandatory across an entire curricu-

lum, it is likely higher education's emphasis on technology will only continue, and it would seem prudent to remind my administrative colleagues of an oft misquoted phrase from William Congreve's *The Old Batchelour*, "Married in haste, we may repent at leisure."

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Teaching and Research: A Symbiotic Relationship

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Those who question the value of research in higher education suggest that the primary function of college and university teachers is to teach and that teachers who conduct research are doing so at the expense of improving their teaching. It also has been suggested that the key to being an effective professor is simply to be able to communicate well with students. This is an unfortunate point of view. Being a good communicator does not necessarily mean that one is a good teacher. The professor must also have something worthwhile to communicate. To have something worthwhile to communicate, teachers must challenge themselves through continuous study and research. In so doing, they then can challenge their students.

Research at the college and university level reinforces teaching. Teaching faculty must stay in the forefront of the knowledge and skills intrinsic in the disciplines they profess. They cannot do this by simply rewording old lecture notes and by professing existing knowledge repeatedly. Outstanding teachers must keep abreast of the journals and must gather new information on the subjects they teach. By doing this, they will have completed the first step on the road to doing original, creative research. Those who do original research are better able to judge the intellectual works of others and to evaluate the quality of those works. They also can use anecdotes or examples spontaneously to answer student ques-

tions or to add substance to discussions. This is much better than simply teaching what others have done, often just echoing or paraphrasing another's work. Not all professors can be expected to generate great research works. But in participating in the research process they become more productive and their students benefit by having teachers who are committed to this process. Augusta State University recognizes that research and teaching should nurture each other, and several efforts aimed at faculty development in research have been initiated.

Departmental Efforts

First, at the "grass roots" level, some academic departments hold informal meetings at which faculty can share research ideas and offer reactions and advice to each other. For example, the Department of Mathematics and Computer Sciences has regular meetings with a group of public school mathematics and science teachers in which ideas about teaching and research are shared. Similarly, the Department of Teacher Development has informal meetings on Friday afternoons to discuss research that faculty are doing, and to discuss their plans for future research. As the weeks go by, evidence of new faculty commitments to research has become evident.