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Death By PowerPoint - How to Avoid It; and the Death of Note-taking, and How To Revive It

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Using Now
9/30

Involving
Undergrads in
Research 10/2
Addressing
Interim Grades
10/7

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Students for
Nationally
Competitive
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Death By PowerPoint—How To Avoid It; and the Death of Note-taking, and How To Revive It

Try this: do a Google search on the phrase “Death by PowerPoint.”

You will yield over two million hits.

If you use PowerPoint or some other presentation software in your teaching or for meetings, as most of us probably do, you need to be aware of this apparently deadly disease.

My favorite that I clicked on is a YouTube video, “Life After Death by Powerpoint,” by comedian Don McMillan. Funny—except that I have been guilty of many of the deadly sins he highlights.

Another popular site is “Death by PowerPoint” by Alexei Kapterov. This is, ironically, a PowerPoint presentation, but he shows you what many of us are doing wrong and how to fix it.

A similar PP, geared to education, is “Stop Killing Students with PowerPoint.” You can find these examples and more with a quick Google

search, so I am not providing links, which do not show up well in these columns.

To sum up their advice, a few points. Don’t put too much information on one slide. Don’t write out everything you mean to say and then read it aloud. The average person speaks 150 words a minute. The average reader reads 250 words a minute. (Even I can do that math!) Be careful about fancy fonts and busy design and too much animation.

I have experienced Death by PowerPoint in meetings and classes, and I am sure I have inflicted it on students. I know that PP has its uses in the classroom, despite all these problems. I also believe its use, even its good use, has had some harmful effect on teaching and learning, some of them not immediately obvious.

Here are some of my suggestions for teaching with PP, based on my

reading and experience:

1. Never merely read the slides aloud. That will surely result in the dreaded “D by PP.” I will project a slide and say to the class, “Read that.” Then I stand silently. Then I ask, “What does that mean?” If I do all the reading, I am doing most of the thinking and learning. You can also ask a student to read the points on the slide.

2. Have something to say besides what is on the slide. That advice goes along with the rule of not putting too much on a slide, and certainly not everything you are going to say. If the slide merely introduces the idea and you have to flesh it out and provide more information, the students will have to, gasp, take notes! (More on that later.) Bingo, active rather than passive learning. Even better: if the information is taken from class reading, have the students provide the extra information.

3. Have students or student groups design

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Continued from page 1

the presentations. I am always astonished at how well students can do this. They may need your help beforehand, but I think this is worth the time. Who learns the most from a PP? I would say the maker. Make them the makers, thus the learners.

4. Try making a "reverse PowerPoint." Before class, make a presentation that only has an overall outline, with blank bullet points to fill in the content. In class, have students fill in the blanks, while you (or even better, a student) types in the content. This strategy works really well for outlining a chapter or for a review.

5. Plan the way you will let the students have the presentation. Do you send it out to them before class? Do you send it after? Do you post it on Blackboard or another source? There are reasons for doing each, and problems with each. Obviously, you are trying to share the information, but there are pitfalls. Especially if the PP includes all the information you are trying to present, there is very little incentive for students to come to class, or to pay attention during class if they do come. If "it's all in the PP," what incentive do they have for coming and

actively learning? Some people post presentations not long before class, then take them down relatively soon. Some send the PP only to students who were present. Note that advice point number two, not putting everything into the PP, takes care of some of the problem.

6. Insist that students take notes during the presentation. Note-taking increases understanding, both during class and later. Again, if you have more to say than what is on the slide, that will increase the need for students to take notes. Insisting that they take notes is an important way to shift them from passive to active learning.

I am becoming passionate about note-taking as a learning tool. In my observations of my classes and of others' classes, I see that students do not take notes the way they used to and the way that many of us assume they will. It is becoming clear to me that my assumption that students will automatically take notes during class is erroneous. I suspect PowerPoint and its misuse is a big cause for the decline in student note-taking.

I have been giving my class very important

information, only to realize that 90% of them are not writing anything down. I have observed classes totally based on lecture and have seen only three or four of 30 students taking notes. An honors student who tutors for ASC told me that when he asks his tutees for notes from class, all they can say is, "I printed out the PowerPoint." The only physical record many students have of their college education is a series of slides that somebody else made for them. I suspect that PP has caused not only the death of their attention spans, but also the death of note-taking.

I have begun telling my students when they should be taking notes. I truly hate that things have come to this pass, but they have. It is easy to pin the blame on Bill Gates, but much of it falls squarely on us. We have to be wary when our tools not only become our masters, but even worse our tools defeat our purpose. We can master the tools and make them work for us, but only with some thought and effort.



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

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Thought For the Week

"I think we never become really and genuinely our entire and honest selves until we are dead--and not then until we have been dead years and years. People ought to start dead, and they would be honest so much earlier."
--Mark Twain