Chapter 9
Use of Presentations in the Classroom:
How Innovative Can It Be?

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ABSTRACT

The use of electronic presentations in the classroom has become a controversial subject, as the innovative educational value of electronic presentation tools such as MS-PowerPoint or Prezi is being questioned. This study uses the participatory research approach to investigate how college instructors feel about the use of PowerPoint presentations when teaching an introductory course of computer information systems. Nine college instructors participated in this research project by exchanging their views through an online discussion forum. The findings revealed that PowerPoint presentations are perceived by instructors as valuable only when combined with other teaching techniques. Moreover, it became evident that the instructors perceived that although students' attention and participation is affected by the use of electronic presentations, their actual performance is not.

INTRODUCTION

The launching of MS-PowerPoint in the late eighties is considered by many educators a milestone in the history of Technology Enhanced Learning. One of the main uses of PowerPoint presentations is to support face-to-face teaching in classrooms. Nevertheless, there is a considerable number of instructors who feel that the use of electronic presentations, especially when they are not combined with other teaching techniques, may not be as effective as it appears to be.

A significant amount of research has been done on this subject. Various studies demonstrate how powerful PowerPoint presentations can be; at the same time, an impressive number of studies call for our attention to the weaknesses of this same method. Parker (2001, p. 76) points out that "PowerPoint

can be an impressive antidote to fear—converting public-speaking dread into moviemaking pleasure", but at the same time warns the users that "It helps you make a case, but it also makes its own case: about how to organize information, how much information to organize, how to look at the world". Criticizing PowerPoint, Waller & Gove (2007, p. 2) cite a communication specialist: "It [PowerPoint] provides a comforter, really. It would be more sensible just to talk (…) With PowerPoint, people feel they can get away with practicing less, if they have the words in front of them".

The aim of this study is not to take sides on this debate about the usefulness of PowerPoint presentations; rather, it is to investigate how instructors feel about the use of PowerPoint presentations. In particular, the research question that this paper attempts to answer is:

How do college instructors feel about the use of PowerPoint presentations when teaching an introductory course of computer information systems?

This issue was raised in a recent departmental meeting in my college; while discussing problems that were related to student motivation, participation, and performance, the possibility of the existence of a relationship between these and the in-class use of PowerPoint presentations was mentioned. In the context of that discussion it became apparent that not all colleagues used PowerPoint presentations in the same way, and not all of them shared the same feelings for the use of PowerPoint; consequently, the idea of investigating this further was born, since the findings would have a practical application in the teaching and learning in our department.

The interest in the college-level instructors stems from the authors college-level professor status. The reason for the interest in the introductory course level is that the majority of students attending introductory classes are college freshmen, thus quite young and usually lacking the maturity of older students; consequently, it is crucial for their professors to make use of the most enticing methods in their disposal in order to manage to attract their students' interest and actively engage them in an effective learning process.

The reason for choosing to investigate the use of PowerPoint presentations in the context of a computer information systems course is that instructors from the computer information systems discipline, given their background, are very well acquainted with PowerPoint and its 'magic'; in several cases, training students to use PowerPoint as a tool to create successful presentations may be one of the responsibilities of these same instructors. As a result, it is safe to assume that the preparation of their presentations is achieved rapidly and effortlessly, overcoming the disadvantage identified by Bartsch & Cobern (2003) related with the excessive time some instructors have to spend in the preparation of presentations.

The participatory research methodology was employed in this study. Nine professors, including the authors, participated in an online forum discussion in which their views about the use of PowerPoint presentations in our classrooms were exchanged.

METHODOLOGY

Finn (1994) identified three main features that differentiate participatory research from the other methodologies: people, power, and praxis. Participatory research emphasizes the importance of the involvement of the people-subjects in the whole research process (data collection, analysis, interpretation, etc). This shifts part of the power from the researcher to the participants: they are no longer just the research subjects; instead, they are empowered by their own active participation. The last feature, praxis (act)

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