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The Use of PowerPoint in the Public Speaking Classroom

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Abstract

In response to online discussions regarding whether communication educators should teach students in public speaking how to utilize Microsoft PowerPoint for developing visual aids, this paper identifies arguments both for and against the practice. The paper begins by delineating the three relevant questions and describes the positions offered by participants in the CRTNet discussions of late November through early December of 2000. The paper also suggests another issue that was not discussed: the ethics of promoting the product of a monopolizing corporation. The paper concludes by offering some tips for students preparing computer-mediated visual aids.

## The Use of PowerPoint in the Public Speaking Classroom

Since the introduction of presentation software, the question of whether and how it should be taught as a tool for assisting in the delivery of speeches has become increasingly relevant for communication educators. This panel and presentation were instigated by an online discussion of communication educators regarding the use of Microsoft's PowerPoint presentation software by students (see Appendix A). However, this was by no means the first discussion on the topic, as the issue has been debated in previous conferences, articles, and opinion editorials. Our purpose is to revisit the arguments for and against student use of computer-mediated visual aids in the public speaking classroom and to open for discussion the associated issues from the perspective of communication educators with experience teaching public speaking. The purpose of this position paper is to attempt to answer three questions: (a) should we teach the use of visual aids, (b) should we teach the use of presentation software as a visual aid tool, and (c) should we teach the use of PowerPoint?

I should begin by stating that I have taught and required the use of PowerPoint in my public speaking and professional communication classes. Through trial and error I have learned some of the benefits and detriments to its use. The same can be said of non-computer aided visual aids, such as posters, flip-charts and drawings. This past summer, for example, I taught a class entitled "Professional Presentations" which required the use of presentation software as a main component of the course assignments. The UTSA is a "Microsoft" campus. PowerPoint is available to students through computing services, and is also deeply discounted for students' purchase through the bookstore. Given my experience, the answer to the three questions posed above should seem obvious. However, there are several issues associated with its use made relevant through discussions with educators that should be addressed here.

It would seem that teaching the use of visual aids in public speaking is self evident. However, simply requiring their use in a speech without demonstrating effective use has led to many examples of bad student speeches. As we shall see, simply replacing the old "manual" means of producing visual aids with technologically advanced means does not necessitate advancement in effectiveness. Yet, much educational research has demonstrated that visual aids can have enormous impact on the audience. In fact, pedagogical/androgogical theory on learning styles suggests the use of visual aids has a strong positive influence on memory. Many of us were taught in our graduate programs that attention to the diversity of student learning styles would aid the memory retention of students. Some students learn more effectively through our use of visual media. As Shope (CRTNet, December 5, 2000) suggested, visual aids assist in memory by de-emphasizing mental resources needed for note-taking and allowing those resources to be utilized for critical thinking. In fact, Johnson (1997) points out that we remember images much more easily than we remember text.

In public speaking classes we urge our students to consider all of the elements of their speech in reference to their goals. Effective speeches are well researched, well organized, and presented with attention to delivery. Visual aids assist the speaker in meeting his/her purpose provided those aids are developed in concert with the speech in ways that do not detract from the speech. As with the speech itself, the clearer and more developed the visual aid, the more effective it is in assisting the speaker to meet his or her goals.

Given that, does the use of technologically advanced tools such as presentation software aid in the development of a clearer visual aid. From the standpoint of comparison between "manually" created visual aids such as hand drawn posters and a PowerPoint slide, the computer-aided visual aid has the potential for being clearer, more "professional looking" and

more compelling. Yet, presentation software can also be used in ways that detract from the speech as a whole. For example, I have observed (as I suppose many of you have) entire presentations where the speaker read the outline of the speech as it was presented in bullet points in a slide show, as if the speaker was not even relevant to the speech at all. Therefore, teaching its proper use is paramount.

Communication educators are divided on the effectiveness of presentation software as a tool for assisting in the delivery of speeches. A brief content analysis of the comments in the CRTNet discussion thread on this topic dated between November 29, 2000 and December 12, 2000 revealed that of the 27 participants, seven expressed negative opinions regarding teaching PowerPoint in the public speaking classroom, eleven were in favor of teaching PowerPoint in the public speaking classroom, and nine expressed consent with reservations. Of the seven which expressed negative opinions, the most often cited reasons were the potential for students to misuse the medium and the importance of teaching the rudiments of public speaking before advancing to technological tools for visual aids. One participant acknowledged that while teaching PowerPoint in the public speaking classes was problematical, perhaps teaching it in an upper-level class might be more appropriate (see Handford, CRTNet, November 30, 2000).

Additionally, Poulos (CRTNet, December 1, 2000) pointed out that PowerPoint has the ability to disengage the audience from the process of dialog. According to Poulos, PowerPoint (or any computer-mediated visual aid) can suffer from becoming monological. Another participant commented that teaching or requiring PowerPoint may disadvantage some students who do not have equal access to the technology. This may be a non-issue on campuses where the software is installed on computers to which students have equal access. But this presupposes that students have the time outside of class to stay on campus during hours of operation.

Of the eleven who encouraged teaching PowerPoint, the most often cited reason was that students' ability to use the technology was necessary for the job market. This particular point was debated among CRTNet participants as Poulos mentioned businesses banning PowerPoint, whereas Glikman (CRTNet, November 30, 2000) and Hubbell (CRTNet, December 1, 2000) questioned that claim. Indeed, according to Denison (2000), PowerPoint is a "must-have" in the business world. In my own experience, I have seen PowerPoint used extensively, including research presentations at non-communication conferences (such as the American Public Health Association convention, the National Rural Health Association convention, and the Illinois Rural Health Association convention). Furthermore, even if businesses did ban using PowerPoint in presentations, does that point necessarily disavow teaching its effective use? Downing and Garmon (2001) suggest that employers still require the knowledge.

Nine CRTNet participants suggested that PowerPoint be taught but with certain caveats. These caveats included: a) providing the rudiments of proper speaking and visual aid development first (Miller, CRTNet, November 29, 2000), b) emphasizing the priority of speaking over visual aids (Wallace, CRTNet, November 30, 2000), and c) allowing for and possibly promoting other tools. I would add to that the requirement that computer-mediated visual aids be used sparingly and only when their use significantly contributes to the goals of the speech. (I have included the tips sheet I give to my students in Appendix B.)

Curiously absent from the CRTNet discussion regarding PowerPoint was any mention of the ethics of teaching the use of a product manufactured and distributed by a monopolistic corporation. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia filed suit against Microsoft several years ago, and the United States Federal court system has found that Microsoft is a monopoly. This judgment was rendered prior to the CRTNet discussion mentioned above.

Microsoft has been found guilty of using unfair advantage and illegal trade practices to dominate the software market. In fact, tomorrow is the deadline for Microsoft and the government to negotiate a settlement before a new trial takes place to determine the penalties (Associated Press, 2001). Furthermore, the behavior of Microsoft which brought about the case against it does not seem to have changed. According to Gillmor (2001), Microsoft's new XP operating system creates an even more anti-competitive environment by forcing hardware retailers to sell new PC hardware with the new operating system installed. As well, the new operating system requires consumers to register the software online within a certain time-frame or the computer will stop working. And, if hardware is added to the computer after the initial purchase, the computer will also stop working unless the user puts a call into Microsoft to resolve the problem. Microsoft will then connect to the user's computer over the internet, exposing the user's files to the company.

What then is our role in promoting Microsoft by teaching the use of PowerPoint, the market-leading presentation software package? From a practical standpoint, as stated above, on many campuses PowerPoint may be the only presentation software package available. Do we then choose to teach PowerPoint knowing that other options may be available once students leave the university? As Downing and Garmon (2001) point out, there are several presentation software packages available. Other than PowerPoint they list Corel Presentations, Harvard Graphics, and Astound. I have also used Lotus Freelance. As Rosenthal (CRTNet, December 11, 2000) suggested, software packages come and go. To be sure, PowerPoint, or for that matter any presentation program, is not the only option available. At UTSA, electronic media is one of the four concentrations for the communication major. Certainly, our students have access to graphics development tools other than presentation software. If the goal is to teach PowerPoint as a tool in

the aid of creating visual aids, and it is framed as only one of many possibilities allowing other tools to be used, then examining PowerPoint as a tool may be defensible.

In conclusion, teaching PowerPoint in the public speaking classroom may be necessary to provide students with another tool to prepare them for their career. Should we be teaching PowerPoint? I believe the answer is yes, with the understanding that (computer-mediated) visual aids have importance when they assist in meeting the purpose/goal of a speech. PowerPoint should be taught with the understanding that (any) presentation software is only a tool for visual aid delivery. And educators should be mindful of communicating to students that PowerPoint is only one of many tools.

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