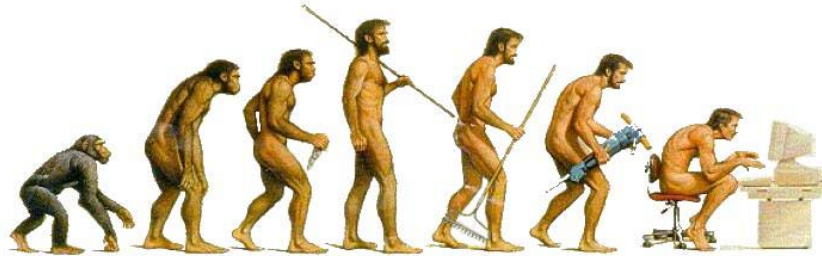


THE EVOLUTION OF POWERPOINT'S USE: FROM PATHETIC TO POWERFUL

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EVOLUTION



(OR IS IT?)

ABSTRACT

Teaching involves motivating students to become active learners. Visual presentations can add considerably to the classroom environment, if done well. Unfortunately, many packaged PowerPoint accompaniments to textbooks are produced with little attention to professionalism. This paper provides a comparison of the uses of PowerPoint from the least sophisticated to presentations that utilize the real power of the visual delivery of information in a classroom setting. Visual examples of each category will be presented in the conference presentation.

INTRODUCTION

As Marshal McLuhan [1] once said: "The medium is the message". This paper is designed to primarily be an accompaniment to a visual/verbal presentation. While unconventional in its written format, the message of improving PowerPoint presentations by faculty is of importance to faculty throughout the world.

Numerous software packages are available to assist faculty in the mechanics and development of visual aids for classroom instruction. Microsoft PowerPoint's website provides a tutorial with the basics instructions for the various features of PowerPoint at www.office.microsoft.com/en-us/powerpint-help. Additionally, there are numerous books available to assist the neophyte with design techniques. Among the best are those by Reynolds [2], Kupsch [3], Graves [4], Duarte [5], and Wevera [6].

PowerPoint software was developed years ago yet many faculty have not availed themselves of the depth of features programmed into the software. Many universities and colleges require students to successfully demonstrate computer competence in the Windows environment using spreadsheets (Excel), word processing (MS Word), and presentation software (PowerPoint). Rarely are faculty asked to demonstrate their competency in these areas, including presentation software. Left to their own devices, faculty often are slow to adopt and apply the latest technology available to them to improve their classroom visual presentations.

This paper presents the spectrum of uses and abuses of PowerPoint ranging on a continuum from pathetic to that of robust using the more advanced opportunities to enhance the classroom learning environment.

OVERHEADS

Early adopters of PowerPoint software took their overhead transparencies and scanned them into PowerPoint format. No attention was given to layout, font size, nor volume of material contained on the single page/slide. Since overhead transparencies by nature were clear as a background, then the conversion to PowerPoint yielded black font on a white background. Only rarely was there the use of colored fonts or graphics. When queried by their peers, faculty readily responded that they used the "state of the art" classroom technology, when in fact the conversion from overheads to PowerPoint presentations contained no content or format changes whatsoever. Instead of removing one overhead and replacing it with another one, the presenter required only the push of a computer key to advance to another slide! This was hardly an advance of technology from the student's perspective.

"I FOUND GOLD!"

The first real application of PowerPoint's capabilities occurred when faculty realized that color was available with minimum effort in the construction of a PowerPoint slide. Color transparencies were far too expensive to be produced en masse for the faculty of a university. Blue backgrounds with gold fonts became the absolute rage. Problematic was the fact that the slides continued to contain far more material than suggested by the "7 by 7" rule (Graves, 2009). The evolution was minimal in effectiveness as the errors of too many lines with a font far too small continued as the norm.

DODGE THOSE BULLETS

Bullets provided the next step in the PowerPoint evolution with the use of the animation feature, individual lines of text could be brought onto the slide one at a time. Unfortunately, the selection options were just too tempting for the newbie to pass up such that lines of text entered the slide from every possible starting point including left side, right side; from the bottom and from the top. Not to be

outdone was the method of introducing the text ranging from a wiggling wave to that of an exploding cube of letters. The temptation to add too many lines per slide continued and thus the visual observer was deluged with words floating all over the screen until they finally settled down to form a bullet point that was readable.

OUTLINE FORMAT

PowerPoint evolved with the capability of taking a scanned MS Word document and converting it automatically into an outline format, complete with multiple indentations of categories and sub-categories. Perhaps the most vociferous opponent of this feature is Edward Tufte with his attack of NASA's PowerPoint presentation of the Challenger disaster [7] [8]. Tufte demonstrated how the report, composed into an outline format by PowerPoint's software mislead the public regarding the disaster's causes.

POWERPOINT'S POTENTIAL

PowerPoint has features that can transition a dull visual presentation to that of an animated action-oriented learning environment for the student. Five features of PowerPoint are specifically identified: Font size; timing; the use of graphics; animation; and the use of sound/music. A presentation putting the pieces together is provided as the last component to this paper (which obviously needs a visual presentation to be effective!).

SIZE MATTERS

Font size and appropriate font type are probably the two biggest mistakes made by newcomers to PowerPoint lectures. *San serif* fonts allows for a clean, clear set of letters with no squiggles attached to the words. Serif is the extensions that appear at the ends of some of the letters. Arial font is an excellent example of a good choice for presentations. Size is the real problem as what may look good on a computer monitor when you are constructing a PowerPoint will be totally lost when projected onto a screen in a classroom designed for fifty to one hundred students. The simple rule is that there should be no more than seven lines of text and no more than seven words per line (the "7 x 7" rule). Presenting numbers in accounting and finance pose a considerable challenge for a designer but there are ways around the problem. Highlighting the particular numbers that are of interest on the slide and then increasing the size of those numbers via animation can focus the audience's attention to the subject at hand.

TIMING

The trick associated with timing is to work backwards. What is the maximum allowable time you have to present your PowerPoint not counting any question and answer session following the slides? Then identify if there are some slides that require you to spend additional time explaining due to the complexity or the importance of the material. The typical rule of thumb is that most slides will require 1-2 minutes per slide and the more complicated ones can take up to five minutes per slide. If you have 40 slides for a five minute presentation, it just isn't going to work!

GRAPHICS

Graphics, in the form of clip art, tables, charts, photos, and/or videos are one of the most powerful tools in the PowerPoint tool bag. Each generation of PowerPoint has enabled users to add material more and more simply. Smart Art is a feature incorporated in the last version of PowerPoint and it is a great way to start using visuals. Relationships are easily displayed with the arrows, ovals, and other diagrams already “pre-programmed”. Introducing clip art and photographs requires an eye for design and the most common mistake is to make the graphic too small. It should comprise approximately 25-30 percent of the entire slide. Graphics connected to animation makes the presentation come alive to the audience.

ANIMATION

The first versions of PowerPoint had minimal abilities for the user to animate objects. Today’s version allows the user to have table entries “grow”, figures to move, objects to appear and then disappear with a replacement figure following, and even to have words change in size and color. The temptation by the new user is to overuse these features, taking away from the real purpose of the presentation. Used cautiously, animation can add the “Wow” factor to a slide to keep the audience’s attention.

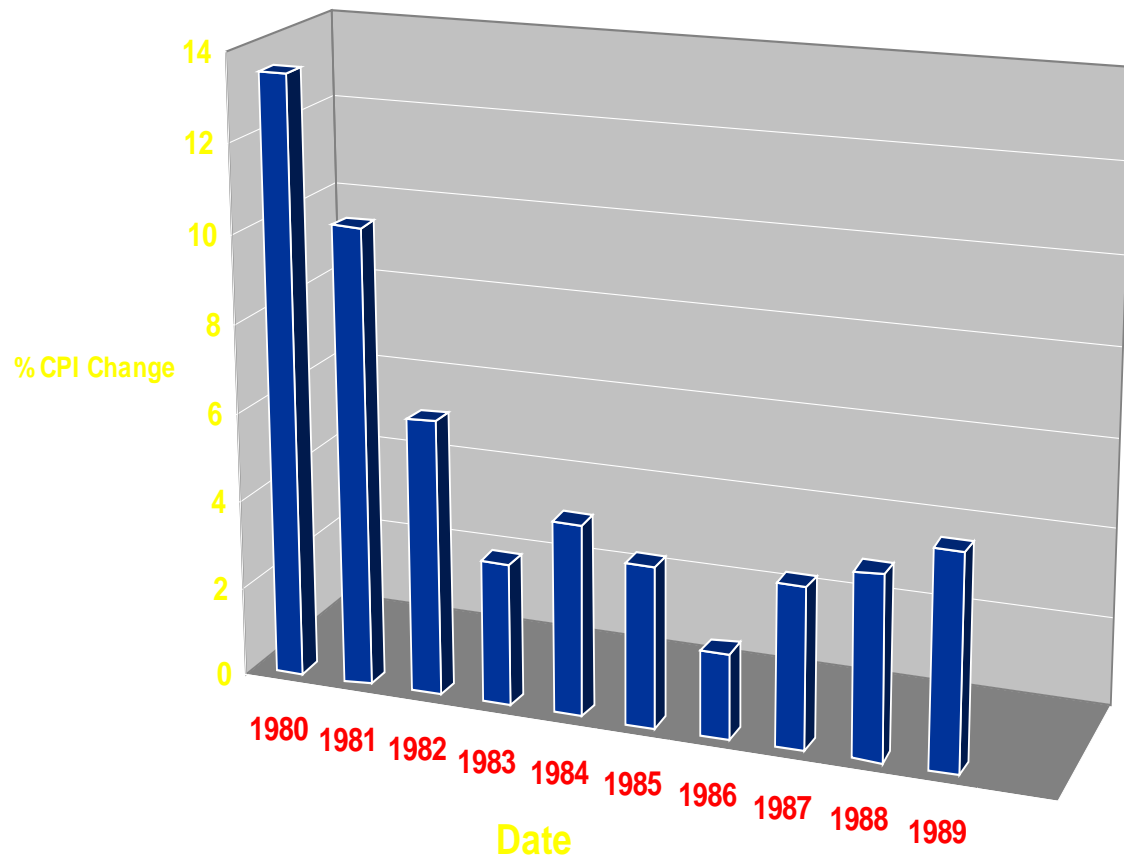
MUSIC AND SOUND

Adding music to PowerPoint is relatively easy with the new version. The features to delay the start of the music or have a song start playing well into the song are powerful additions to any presentation. Sounds can distract the audience and should be used in only a few cases to augment the picture or graphic. Repeated sounds to introduce words or graphics are distracting and should be avoided at all costs. Linking songs from a particular period of time to that of a historical presentation can enhance the retention by the viewer.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

While obviously it is impossible to provide an example in a static paper, the author intends to present examples of PowerPoint presentations that incorporate the five points during a conference presentation. Below is one example of the use of each of the five features described in this paper.

FIGURE 1: THE POWER OF POWERPOINT



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