POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS: GOOD→BETTER→BEST

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"If the presenter is simply going to read the slides, the presentation could more easily have been e-mailed to the members of the audience, saving everybody the time and trouble of having to turn up for the presentation."

~ Thomas Tuohy ~

INTRODUCTION

According to an online publication for faculty and students at the University of Texas, Microsoft PowerPoint is a "powerful and nearly ubiquitous software tool that is commonly misused, and frequently in ways that detract from the quality and effectiveness of oral presentations." In recognition of its being used more and more frequently in education, they acknowledge that "nearly everyone has experienced a mediocre or bad PowerPoint presentation, but few people understand how to use it effectively. Some critics of PowerPoint argue that it enforces a shallow, 'pipeline' style of thinking and speaking, and a few (unfortunately common) techniques appear to dull the attention of audiences. Nevertheless, PowerPoint is almost certainly here to stay, and its use could be improved."

More and more early childhood trainers are using PowerPoint presentations in training events. Once a trainer knows how to develop a PowerPoint presentation from a technical standpoint, they are ready to learn the best ways to use it to enhance the learning process. As is true for any visual aid or presentation format, there are ways to use PowerPoint that boost learning and ways that don't. Trainers can't ignore all they know about adult learning just because they have mastered a new presentation tool!

And that's what PowerPoint is—one of many useful tools for presenting information and promoting learning. Presentation tools should be used in ways that improve participants' engagement with the topic and their connection with the trainer and yet not detract

from one or the other. Trainers who use PowerPoint effectively view it as one of many tools in their toolbox of useful training methods. And like any other tool, there are pros and cons that need to be weighed before selecting it for a particular training event.

PPT PROS

There are distinct advantages to using PowerPoint (PPT). Number one is that it can be just plain fun! Using PPT effectively creates the impression of being professional and well prepared. Some trainers feel less nervous since participants tend to focus on the PPT presentation instead of on them. Other advantages are listed below.

~ PPT helps organize the presentation.

PPT can keep a presentation on track by guiding both presenter and participants along a predetermined path. There's the option of presenter notes pages and ease of revision at any time, even minutes before the session. A PPT presentation is convenient and easy to transport on a memory stick or laptop computer. Slide handouts offer participants key points with room to make their own notes.

~ PPT is especially appealing to visual learners.

PPT slides that include relevant charts, graphs, pictures, cartoons, etc., as well as text, address the needs of the visual learner. That is, the slides are able to reinforce key points of the presentation visually. It is easy to link the presentation directly to

video clips, recordings, or other media, stored either on the attached computer or on the Internet.

~ PPT increases visual appeal for all learners.

Using PPT allows for dynamic content on slides, in the form of animations, multi-media inserts, etc., and enables more vibrant slides because of the free use of color, clip-art, and different font styles. Templates for different appearances are built in, and you can easily input images. These features can make a PPT presentation much more exciting than a text-based handout or handwriting on a white board.

In nearly all cases, showing an audience a physical thing, an actual object, is the best way to engage participants' attention. But when this isn't possible, presentation software like PowerPoint (or Apple's Keynote software) allows you to show things to participants on a large screen. (utexas)

~ PPT benefits delivery.

You can maintain eye contact with participants during the presentation especially when you use notes or the computer screen in front of you instead of turning to refer to the projected slide.

You can reproduce very complex drawings, sound, pictures, and even video clips in your presentation.

You can focus session time on content rather than delivery. It takes less time away from the training to add information with slides than to write it all on a flip chart or white board.

You can show ideas in sequence by revealing one sentence—or slide--after another.

Frequently used presentations are easy to customize for each audience; it is relatively simple to add, change, or delete slides.

~ PPT results in automatic handouts.

Most learners benefit from having the PPT slides printed off for them to follow along and take notes on during the presentation.

~ PPT is paperless.

Using PPT saves printing on plastic transparencies or posting numerous flip charts. Of course, if you print off pages and pages of slides for participant handouts, this can negate the paperless advantage.

~ PPT is able to subtly reinforce purpose/content.

The slide background can suit your audience/topic. For example, slides for a strategic planning session could have a compass as the background. Through PPT you can access supporting material, such as a web site or online dictionary, in a way people can see. Graphical presentation, such as photographs or charts, is often an excellent complement to an oral presentation.

PPT Cons

The disadvantages of using PPT primarily emerge when the technology involved is unreliable or the presenter gets caught up in the proper working of the technology itself (using a laser pointer or beamer as well as the computer). Other disadvantages, however, serve as reminders that PPT is a tool and not a replacement for an effective presenter and meaningful learning activities. Major disadvantages are described below.

~ Creating an effective PPT presentation can take considerable time and effort.

Some features can be quite complicated to use, and even simple features require some getting used to.

Creating a complete presentation takes a good amount of preparation time no matter the length. The training event may be two hours but viewing the PowerPoint should not fill that whole time.

Features such as animations and backgrounds need to be selected with deliberate intent. Unwise use of these features can distract participants from the actual information in the presentation.

~ PPT requires sophisticated technology.

You need an LCD projector and a portable computer that are compatible. A presentation must be either stored on a laptop, memory stick, or external drive.

You may not be able to rely on an unfamiliar computer or laptop to run your presentation; there may be software conflicts and disk space barriers. File size can become quite large for presentations with numerous photographs and charts, etc.

~ PPT necessitates consideration of contingencies.

You need a sizeable screen or blank wall to display the slides properly, a table or stand for the projec-

tor (unless there's a built-in system), and a room large enough to display the slides in a readable size.

Contingency plans should be developed even when they may prove unnecessary. The lack of an extension cord and/or a three-pronged plug adapter can be avoided with a little planning!

~ PPT requires attention to lighting, pace, etc.

In semi-dark presentation rooms it may be difficult to actually get eye contact with your audience.

The presenter may lose sight of the total presentation because there is no preview of next slides.

It is tempting to move quickly through PPT slides because you can, which makes it more difficult for participants to take relevant notes.

Skipping through various slides during your presentation—which sometimes becomes necessary--distracts participants.

PPT Presentation Checklist

The following checklist can help you make sure you address the pros and cons of using PPT. The checklist is organized into two categories: Preparation and Delivery. Each category includes a list of a) basic practices and b) recommendations. For more detail as well as additional recommendations, explore the on-line resources referenced throughout and listed in the "Resources" section at the end of the newsletter.

> "The most important part of any presentation is the content, not the graphical appeal." ~ Dave Paradi*

PREPARATION

☐ **I develop my presentation content first, before deciding on the look.** Use the outline view provided in PPT to develop the content of the presentation before adding the visual elements.

"People who use PPT often think that preparing an oral presentation means preparing a PPT presentation, and then delivering that, with accompanying oral commentary. What PPT can do should not be the starting point of an effective oral presentation." (utexas)

☐ **I create slides so they do not require too frequent mouse or keyboard interaction.** Too many clicks to access the content of one slide can keep you and participants focused on process rather than content. One recommendation is to put the key points on the slide and then anchor your presentation to parts of the slide when you need to by pointing. (Paradi)

☐ **I use light backgrounds in a poorly-lit room and dark backgrounds in a well-lit room.** Backgrounds are quite simple to change, so know your room setup. Participants who can easily read/see what's on each slide will be more attentive.

☐ **I use light fonts on dark backgrounds or dark fonts on light backgrounds.** If you want your audience to be able to see what you have on the slide, there needs to be a lot of contrast between the text color and the background color. (Paradi)

☐ **I avoid using sound effects and animated or busy backgrounds that might detract from the presentation or the content or make slides hard to read.** "Don't even think of using sound effects to highlight the arrival of your bullets on-screen! Screeching tires and cowbells don't belong in any presentation! Using the same sound effect over and over will drive your audience crazy; using a new one every time will take the emphasis off your ideas . . . . the audience will spend all their time wondering what sound will come next, instead of concentrating on what you are trying to say" (Worsley School).

☐ **I use high-contrast color schemes so that slides are readable.** Use the templates that come with PPT or Keynote, and keep it simple. If you use graphics or photos, try to use the highest quality you can find or afford. Clip art and low-resolution graphics blown up on a screen usually detract from a presentation. (utexas)

☐ **I use large fonts.** Any font size less than 24 point is too small to be reasonably read in most situations. Use 28 or 32 point size, with titles being 36 to 44 point size, except for explanatory text for a graph or diagram, where 20 point font size is okay. On a small screen in a big room, the font will look smaller because the image will not be as big as it should be. In this case, get a larger screen, use a wall instead of a screen, move the chairs closer to the screen, or remove the last rows of chairs. (Paradi)

☐ **I use visuals as well as text slides.** Audiences are more fed up than ever with the overload of text on slides. Instead of using slides that only contain text, use visuals such as graphs, diagrams, photos, and media clips to engage the audience. (Paradi)

☐ **I avoid using childish or unnecessary animation/clip-art.** For every animation you include, ask yourself whether it adds to the content or whether the slide can be explained without it. Animation is best used for illustrating any process where ideas or content is added. Animation is unnecessary for backgrounds, individual bullets, comments, etc. (utexas)

☐ **I avoid adding transition and animation effects, such as bounce, fly in, unfold, etc., offered by PPT.** "By now, most people roll their eyes when they see these things, and these tricks add nothing of value to a presentation." (utexas) Moving text cannot be read until it stops moving. Presenters have to wait between points, and participants tend to focus on the movement rather than on what is being said. When text comes on the screen, you want participants to read the text, and then focus on you to hear the message. "Use the 'Appear' effect, which makes text just appear and is easiest to read (Paradi)."

☐ **I limit the number of slides by focusing on key points or illustrations of key points.** "Don't use too many slides--one slide per minute in a presentation is a good average to remember" (Tuohy).

☐ **When I use slides as a handout, the printout is big enough for everyone to read.** There are multiple choices for printing the slides for handouts. Consider readability and resist the temptation to put too many slides on a page. When there are pages and pages of slides, take it as a warning to reduce the number of slides to key points.

☐ **I limit information on each slide.** PPT is best used as a tool of illustration—to supplement and enhance what you are saying. When there is so much information on a single slide that the typical person cannot read it easily or doesn't even want to try, you may lose participants' attention to their frustration. Four to eight lines of text with no more than eight to ten words per line is sufficient. There is no reason to use complete sentences (except in a quote). Do not display charts or graphs with a lot of information. If it's useful for participants to see such things, give them handouts. (utexas)

☐ **I rehearse my PPT presentation.** Make sure you know how PPT works, what sequence the slides are in, how to get through it using someone else's computer, etc. Be prepared in case you have to give your presentation without your PPT presentation. (utexas)

☐ **I arrive early for the training event and check whether my equipment works properly.**

☐ **I turn off Standby Power Management.** To ensure that the laptop stays on if you are inactive for a while during the presentation, go to Control Panel -> Power and turn it off. Coming out of Standby can take a while and may even necessitate a reboot.

☐ **I turn off screen saver.** When screen saver kicks in during the presentation, it can be distracting to both you and the participants.

☐ **I do not assume my presentation will work on another laptop.** If it is necessary to use another laptop, make sure that that laptop has adequate disk space and memory, no screen saver or standby turned on, and the appropriate versions of software that you need, including the appropriate version of PPT.

DELIVERY

☐ **I use PPT to enhance my presentation not as a slide-show outline of what I am telling participants.** PPT is a useful tool for showing participants photos, graphs, charts, maps, etc., that enhance what you are teaching and illustrate content. It can also be used to highlight certain text, such as quotations or major ideas. Repeating or simply following what's displayed on a slide has been shown to diminish listeners' attention, shift attention from you to the screen, and detract from your ability to engage with participants. Presenters who simply recite what is on their PPT slides are notoriously dull. (utexas)

☐ **I concentrate on keeping the audience focused on me, not on the screen.** When you use slides sparingly, stand in front of the audience in a way that makes them look at you, and, if possible, go to the screen and use your hand or arm to point out things on a slide, you keep participants focused on you. If you expect to be using PPT a lot, invest in a remote or ask someone to run the presentation so you can get away from the screen and keyboard while you talk. (utexas)

☐ **I remember that what looks okay on a computer screen often looks confusing on a projection screen.** Avoid using the cursor as a pointer. It's faster, more accurate, and more natural to just point with your finger. Keep motion on the screen to a minimum, unless you're showing a movie or a video. It's usually better to show a static screen-shot of a Web page, embedded on a slide, than to call up the page in a browser. Trainers who talk while simultaneously operating a computer are almost certain to lose their audience. If you want to point out something on a Web page, go to the screen and point at it; don't jiggle the cursor around what you want people to look at. (utexas)

☐ **I use black slides.** Including a black/blank slide at break points helps participants refocus on you rather than on the screen and keeps their connection with what is being said. You can direct them back to the screen when you have something else to show them. (utexas) Using a blank slide as the final slide avoids dropping into the PPT program at the end of the presentation. (Paradi)

☐ **I know how to draw on the screen and use it when needed.** It can be valuable to be able to draw on the screen during your presentation to illustrate a particular point or item. To display a pen on the screen, press the Ctrl-P key combination. Use the left mouse button to draw on the slide or circle a key point as you wish. To erase everything, press the E key. To hide the pen, press either the A key or the Ctrl-H key combination. (Paradi)

☐ **I do not "cue" the audience that completing the session means getting through my PPT presentation.** People sense when you are dependent on PPT. They quickly grasp that the length of the training is tied to the length of the PPT presentation. This shifts their attention to how many slides there are, or, if the slides are delivered as handouts, how many slides are left to go, and they are no longer listening to you. (utexas)

☐ **I know how to give a good presentation without PPT.** Many participants remember training as being a lot better before PPT than it is now. Avoiding bad PPT habits means, first and foremost, becoming a good instructor. This takes practice, which means facilitating training without PPT. (utexas)

CONCLUSION

When PowerPoint is used effectively, it can greatly enhance participants' understanding of training content and promote learning. As a training tool, it has a great deal of flexibility and provides a ready support and resources for the trainer's presentation.

The key is to use PPT features with deliberate intention just as you would any other training tool. By using the PPT Checklist, you can be reassured that you are creating and delivering a presentation that is the best that it can be. ~

> "What has been turned upside-down over the past decade's spread of PPT, for most PPT users, is that the "speech" is now mostly what's on the screen, rather than what is spoken. In other words, the proper relation of the illustration tool to the speech has been reversed. In the opinion of many people, this has tragically damaged the art of public speaking. No one can imagine Abraham Lincoln nor Martin Luther King, Jr., needing PPT. But today many people who give oral presentations cannot imagine doing so without PPT." (utexas)

RESOURCES

Getting Started with Microsoft PPT at Wellesley College Information Services (2003). Provides easy step-by-step directions, complete with screen-shots, on how to do almost everything in PowerPoint. www.wellesley.edu/Computing/Office03/Powerpoint03/general.html

Ten Secrets for Using PPT Effectively by Dave Paradi, author of "The Visual Slide Revolution." www.thinkoutsidetheslide.com

Ten Thoughts on Using PPT Effectively and Ten Sins of PPT (2010). www.utexas.edu/lbj/21cp/syllabus/powerpoint_tips2.htm

Using PPT Effectively by Thomas Tuohy (2009). Common PPT problems and solutions. www.bangkokpost.com/life/education/24732/using-powerpoint-effectively

Using PPT Effectively at Worsley School Online resources for teachers. www.worsleyschool.net

Using PPT Effectively - or Not by Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne. 24-slide PPT presentation of examples and guidelines for the effective use of PPT.

http://users.ipfw.edu/ashton/Using%20PowerPoint%20Effectively.ppt

What to do and What to avoid with PowerPoint Presentations by Anand Natrajan. www.anandnatrajan.com/FAQs/powerpoint.html

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