

“NEXT SLIDE, PLEASE”: AN ANALYSIS AND CONVERSATION ON THE USES AND MISUSES OF MICROSOFT POWERPOINT AT LIBRARY INSTRUCTION CONFERENCES

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What is the first technology you think of if you are presenting at a conference? If you are like most presenters at library conferences you think of Microsoft's PowerPoint software. PowerPoint is flourishing at library conferences. To illustrate, let's look at the two premier library instruction conferences for academic librarians in the United States, LOEX and LOEX-of-the-West (LOTW). At LOEX 2006 there were 30 breakout programs, 30 featured PowerPoint, or 100%. At LOTW 2006 there were 40 breakout programs, 39 featured PowerPoint, or about 98%. In short, these two examples indicate that PowerPoint is the preferred method of communicating, presenting, and sharing knowledge at library conferences.

But is this proliferation of PowerPoint use what audiences want? Or is the primary cause of PowerPoint use at conferences presenter convenience? If they stop to ponder these questions at all, most presenters answer on the basis of hunches and traditions rather than empirically based research findings. Considering the extent to which PowerPoint is used at library conferences, it is surprising that few, if any, studies in library literature investigate the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of presenters and audiences regarding PowerPoint presentations at professional meetings.

This proceeding explores how librarians think about PowerPoint use at library conferences. Here we offer a sample of the responses that we collected in an online survey of all the speakers and attendees of LOEX 2006 and LOTW 2006, a total population of 438 individuals. Because some people in the population were unreachable, we actually invited 409 people to participate. Of those, 200 or about 41% responded to the questions on *SurveyMonkey*. The survey consisted of a

combination of 28 open and closed questions. In a future article, we will analyze and summarize the survey results and study them alongside a content analysis of the PowerPoint slides used at LOEX 2006 and LOTW 2006.

The present proceeding is primarily intended to provide insight; our emphasis is not on recommendations or conclusions. However some general lessons can be learned from the comments provided, and a number of issues that deserve attention and consideration for future presenters are identified.

1. LIBRARIANS' PREFERENCES FOR SPEAKERS TO USE POWERPOINT

Survey respondents were asked to provide, in their own words, why (or why don't) you prefer speakers to use PowerPoint at library conferences? The sample below offers verbatim comments¹.

I think PowerPoint ruins presentations. We read more quickly than someone speaks, and when the person goes point by point, it's amazingly easy to get bored.

The PowerPoint often becomes the focus rather than the content or speaker. It distracts me from the content instead of focuses me on it.

I find ppt distracting - I spend more time focusing on the ppt slides than on the speaker; speaker is often distracted by ppt - changing slides (flipping too fast, having to go back, figuring out how to change the slides, etc.); moving between ppt and web pages or other applications

I don't mind if a presenter shows a few slides, but over reliance on PP is annoying. I feel like the presenter isn't really speaking to the audience, just narrating.

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It is great for presenting data (statistics, charts, etc.) that might otherwise be lost in just a verbal representation, but otherwise it more frequently reduces the impact of a speaker's content then adding to it.

I think the medium has become limiting - It dictates a particular (bulleted, organizational, etc.) approach. We had a top candidate (who we later hired) who did his whole presentation using a few symbols on a chalk board. It was remarkably refreshing

I think too many presenters using ppt slides use them the wrong way - too much text, reading right off the slides, putting too much on one slide, etc. Presenters need to write differently for ppt slides, just as one needs to write differently for web pages than a prose document.

It gives me a second chance to understand what's being taught. It's back up if I can't hear, can't understand the accent, have trouble grasping the concept. I'm a good auditory learner, but using auditory and visual together is just a lot easier. I think building presentation slides, also forces people to think through to the essence of what they really want to get across.

I'm a multiple modality learner and like to have the ppt to guide the learning/content delivery. Plus ppt is very powerful and allows one to seamlessly integrate graphics, multimedia without needing any text to explain or make a point!!!! You can also easily switch between ppt and a live web-connection...the slides reinforce the main points a presenter is trying to make.

Using PowerPoint helps the presenter stay on track during the presentation. Limits the amount of daydreaming during the presentation by the audience. I find that I pay closer attention to the contents of the presentation when I follow the PowerPoint and take notes on the handout.

I like to have visuals to go along with auditory and hands on experience--a little interaction. The worst 'presentation' is when a speaker reads a paper then answers questions. Don't waste my time and money--just publish it!

When used effectively slides enhance the content and I have to see the words or images to process the information. I learn and retain nothing when I just take in oral information (i.e. when a speaker just speaks). Handouts work for me too, but PowerPoint allows the speaker to point and reference their 'prop' which makes it more interactive in my opinion. PowerPoint shows you where the presentation is going, where it's been, and what the presenter thinks are the most important points for highlighting.

2. ANNOYING CHARACTERISTICS OF BAD POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

The survey explored librarian's perceptions of the most annoying characteristics of bad PowerPoint presentations. Respondents were given a list of possible

complaints and asked to rank the ones they found most annoying. The survey also asked an open-ended question to ensure that respondents had an opportunity to add new complaints and provide input in their own words. A sample of verbatim comments is provided below.

When librarians not only read the PowerPoint, but turn their backs to the room to do so. Librarians by default are teachers--and that's breaking every pedagogical rule out there!

Text is too squished together or a bad font size is used or colors don't show up well on screen slides are so sparse that they only barely relate to what the presenter is saying- I want to be able to have the most important points on the slide so I can copy them!

Too many slides, way too many slides!.... don't need to have a slide for EVERYTHING

When people get all flustered because they skipped a slide or lost track of the order, making it obvious that PowerPoint is dictating the presentation. It is no longer functioning just as a tool/learning aid, but rather is driving the presentation. As such, it works against flexibility, spontaneity, non-linear teaching and learning moments. I guess I get annoyed then 1) with the speaker for getting flustered (perhaps not prepared enough? 2) with PowerPoint itself, for being so inflexible, and 3) with the conference culture that pressures everyone to use PowerPoint when it's not always appropriate.

Presenters often use PowerPoint presentations as their presentation notes. This encounters all kinds of problems, like not making eye contact with the audience because they are too busy reading the slide word for word or not moving out from behind the podium.

Lack of use of visual elements (photos, video, clipart).

Slides don't seem to support the presenter's talk. Use of seemingly juvenile graphics in a 'scholarly' presentation.

Giving the entire PowerPoint presentation as the handout. I don't need a reprint of every slide, even in the Notes view with 6 slides per page. I much prefer handouts that summarize the important points.

The thing I really hate is the not the flying text or graphics, but when people use every possible variation of it. One thing comes in from the top, the next a spiral, the next as bubbles. It's just visual noise and distraction. Like a kid with a new toy.

I'm really annoyed by presenters who clearly haven't practiced delivering their presentation aloud. They either just read the slides, or run out of time and try to rush through too much information. Presenters should spend at least as much time rehearsing their delivery as they do on putting together their PowerPoint slides.

I go to conference sessions to hear stories from people. Slides are useful for presenting data or images, but the presenters should always take center stage. A person tethered to a laptop in a darkened room is unlikely to hold my attention.

3. PEER PRESSURE

If a presenter chooses to forego PowerPoint, how will the absence of PowerPoint affect the audience's perception of the speaker's professionalism? To explore this the survey asked if (and why) they believed a presenter is unorganized, inadequate, or unprofessional if they don't use PowerPoint. Following are a sample of verbatim comments.

PowerPoint itself is easy. Just because someone uses it doesn't mean they are organized. In fact I consider over-reliance on PowerPoint a sign of being unorganized or unprofessional. The presentation should be well-rounded, meaning that it is balanced, concise, practiced, and paced (not speaking too quickly, breaking up the lecture with questions or activities, etc.)

Using PowerPoint does not reflect professionalism or organizational skills; a cohesive and interesting presentation, whether pure lecture or using other pedagogical presentation methods, shows that.

PowerPoint is a tool -- the same as using an overhead, slide projector, or chalkboard. The quality of the presentation depends on the speaker, not on their use of a particular tool. How well or poorly they use a particular tool can definitely affect my perception of their presentation. If someone is a great speaker, but their PowerPoint presentations tend to be overly textual, gaudy, or full of typos, the better choice would be to present without PowerPoint.

It is up to the presenter to decide to use or not to use PowerPoint for presenting information. I believe a presenter should be familiar enough to discuss the contents of the presentation without directly reading from a script and standing behind the podium. Listening to a presenter read is boring.

I feel that the opposite may be more accurate. To have someone read a PowerPoint does not demonstrate content mastery. Rather people who do not use them, or use them very little, seem better prepared to me.

An organized, prepared, and professional presenter will provide the audience with a lively and stimulating experience. I've been to wonderful presentations where the presenter used PowerPoint, and equally wonderful presentations where PowerPoint was not used.

Because I've seen a lot of presentations that could have used a foundational ppt. It doesn't have to be a lot of slides. Just something to hold it all together. Unless the speaker is VERY dynamic and engaging, ppt is a plus. And we are talking about library conferences. Sorry, but sometimes we don't have very engaging speakers.

4. WHY USE POWERPOINT?

The survey asked respondents if they had ever presented at a library conference and if they had used PowerPoint at their presentations. Those who responded yes to both questions were able to elaborate through an open-ended question that asked why they used PowerPoint. Below is a sample of verbatim comments.

It helps to organize speaking points, but also allows me to show graphics and multimedia.

Sometimes, just because everyone else is. But usually to back up or distill my point.

It helped me stay on track, illustrate main ideas clearly, and offered a different method of delivering information to my audience other than just using handouts or verbal cues.

Honestly? I am a talker and can go WAY off. Having a well-designed and engaging ppt presentation helps me make sure I cover the points I need to cover and keeps me on track. In addition, I have found that people (especially visual learners) make connections between what you are saying and what they see on the screen...and they appreciate that. When I was a new librarian and just started presenting, it helped me when I would get nervous and make sure I covered everything.

I know how I learn and that there are others in the audience like me. It serves as a prop to illustrate points and convey information in another format from just me speaking. It is easy to use and can sometimes ease the nerves of standing in front of the audience - gives them something else to look at! Also, because I do think PP should be an outline of speaking points, creating one helps me to organize and structure my talk, and also to include multimedia when appropriate.

I needed documentation for my colleagues who think they can evaluate my worth based on the number of scholarly presentations and publications I churn out.

As a supplement to my verbal presentation, and as a way to keep the organization flowing. In addition, I frequently use them as a vehicle to show charts, diagrams and screen shots.

Keep the audience in step with what I was talking about and to assist their understanding of the issues.

5. ADVICE TO PRESENTERS USING POWERPOINT

Respondents were invited to offer advice to colleagues using PowerPoint to present at a library conference. Following are selected verbatim comments.

Think about the information you want to convey. Is there a visual element that PowerPoint would help with? Also, it may be useful to create a PowerPoint to generate an outline to use as a handout, and then perhaps not use PowerPoint at all. Find out,

if you can, how large the room is and its configuration. If folks in the back or at the sides will not be able to see, plan accordingly. Don't let PowerPoint dictate the flow of your presentation or the nature of your presentation. If you can, find some way of involving the audience beyond just listening.

Don't read the slides! Don't use too much text or full sentences. Stick to one or two topics on a slide and no more than 7 bullet points. Also, when delivering the presentation, don't look at the screen, look at the audience.

Use Powerpoint to enhance the presentation, but don't put everything you are going to say on the slides! Powerpoint is a good tool to keep organized and avoid tangents that can eat up time inefficiently, but be careful not to simply read the slides (or note cards, for that matter!).

First, learn to speak. Have something worth presenting. Know what you want your audience to get out of the presentation. Use PowerPoint only if it adds information not available from a handout. Prepare a useful outline to hand out. Practice speaking and ask for constructive criticism. Videotape yourself if possible. Learn from observing both good and bad speakers.

Make the slides 'spare' (like a Zen garden) and use them for information that doesn't convey well without it.

Don't read the slides. Use them as an outline just like we used to use notecards in presentations in the old days. Don't overload the slides with too much information or verbiage. Use visuals to relieve the monotony when appropriate. Don't be afraid to use jokes (cartoons or other humorous material) in PowerPoint to engage your audience (I have a great collection of those).

Think about the message you are trying to convey. Use ppt to enhance your ability to communicate your message. Don't use it as the message.

Keep the slides to a minimum; use slides to highlight KEY concepts your audience needs to walk away with; don't

rely on your slides as your main mode of presentation; take time to format your slides for readability and visual design; if you want your audience to have more details, create an accompanying handout instead of cramming all the details into the slides; avoid flashy slides so as not to distract from the content; spend more time practicing your presentation than composing your slides

Don't spend too much time preparing the PowerPoint at the expense of preparing or rehearsing the actual presentation. PowerPoint should really be used as a supplement to your presentation, rather than as the presentation itself.

Don't put too much on a slide. Don't read from the slides. Don't go too fast through the slides (typically this happens when the person just reads the slides). Don't have too many images fly on the screen and don't speed through each image.

Use these to set the stage, not as a tool behind which to hide. Be lean with text, brief bulleted material is preferable. Use non-distracting backgrounds, so that the material is allowed to speak for itself. Try not to get too fancy with audio, video, and items flying in from all points of the compass. Let the audience see that you are comfortable with your subject and possess most of the flesh that needs to be added to the bones that are the PowerPoint.

Please don't read PowerPoint slides to me. Please consider using PowerPoint to supplement your talk with visuals (photos, sound, video). Don't leave us in a dark room. Choose PowerPoint colors enabling us to see the presentation but leave the lights on in the room. I don't travel to conferences to sit in dark rooms and see the back of people's heads.

ENDNOTES:

1. All verbatim comments presented as entered by survey respondents, including spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors.