

Temporary Rejuvenation or Lifelong Learning? A Life-Changing Conference Session

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In May of 2007, I attended the LOEX National Conference in San Diego. My goals were to network with colleagues, learn new trends, and be rejuvenated. One of the sessions that my colleague and I chose to attend after some hesitation was *"Next slide, please": An analysis and conversation on the uses and misuses of Microsoft PowerPoint at library instruction conferences*. I questioned the potential benefits of the session, fearing it might be a pompous didactic lecture on presentation skills. Instead, the session led by David Brier and Vicky Lebbin from University of Hawaii at Manoa, was quite eye-opening and provided me with skills that (more than year and a half later) are still very relevant to my professional life. This session that I almost skipped was perhaps the most meaningful conference presentation I have ever attended.

My PowerPoint Mistakes

Brier and Lebbin's suggestions were based on content analysis of PowerPoint presentations, survey results and information from presentation consultants such as Edward Tufte and Dave Paradi. Despite my previous confidence in creating PowerPoints, I quickly learned that I was guilty of many of the worst practices for presentation design: I frequently placed whole sentences or paragraphs on slides, included too many words on a single slide, used very small text, and included many text-only slides. I also utilized an excessive number of slides in my presentations. Additionally, I hadn't taken learning styles into consideration and as a result, my presentations did not adequately meet the needs of visual learners. Finally, I also determined that I needed to better engage the audience and allow active participation in the session via the slides.

My PowerPoint Changes

My colleague and I were inspired and a bit ashamed after attending this session, and agreed to go home and reconstruct an upcoming PowerPoint presentation. Our original presentation for this 50 minute session had 18 slides; ten of these slides had heavy text in small print and there was only one graphic (<http://www.nku.edu/~chesnut/Google.pdf>). Our renovated presentation was reduced to 13 slides and only one had much text. We also added larger fonts, shortened bulleted lists from sentences to phrases, and added nine

graphics. The average amount of words per slide before the changes was about 50 (including one slide that had over 100 words). Now, our average word count was only five words per slide, our largest slide had just 40 words and by relying more heavily on visuals to convey our message, 6 of the slides had five or less words per slide.

In our reconstructed presentation we created the slides as "jumping off spots" for what we wanted to cover, rather than attempting to include all concepts and words on the actual slides. This resulted in a shorter and more visually pleasing slideshow that relieved the audience of reading small print. It also improved the quality of the material we presented and allowed us more latitude in what we covered (<http://www.nku.edu/~chesnut/revisedGoogle.pdf>).

My colleagues and I regularly create PowerPoint presentations for conferences and the classroom. All presentations now must pass what we refer to as "the LOEX test" before proceeding.

Results

I have observed a number of benefits to my presentations. Removing heavy amounts of text has challenged me to be more creative during my sessions. Since I no longer have every word of my presentation on the slides, it has allowed for more spontaneity. I can now much more easily choose my words based on the needs or questions of the audience, rather than being chained to a predetermined script. Of course, it was initially intimidating to have my visual "crutch" removed, but it has become quite liberating. I believe it better engages and holds the attention of my audience; rather than reading ahead, they are intrigued by the image on the screen. Additionally, my updated presentations provide enhanced visual appeal through photographs, charts and illustrations. Also, by using fewer slides, I am also more compelled to seek out active learning techniques to fill the allotted time. This too has improved the overall quality of my presentations.

Future Changes

While the techniques I learned in the session have definitely made a difference in my presentations, there are a couple that I have yet to incorporate into my style. I am intrigued by the idea of non-linear presentations, where the audience is given the chance to determine the next direction to pursue. Instead of the instructor proceeding from slide 1, to slide 2, to slide 3, etc., the slide order is driven by the choices the audience makes. This could prove valuable in conference presentations but also in instruction, since it would empower the students to map their own course of learning. Of course, it does require the instructor to change gears quickly, which is slightly more intimidating than a set plan allows. However, I think the benefits would definitely outweigh the obstacles.

I also liked their suggestion of a map indicator and numbers for each slide, to keep the audience on track and to orient people who arrive late to a session. For example, on the bottom of each slide there could be a small graphic that indicates the section title. When I am able to devote more time, these are two techniques that I would like to add to my presentations.

Subsequent Conference Attendance

Attending this session has certainly impacted other conferences, workshops and classes that I attend. I cannot view PowerPoints without screening them according to the guidelines espoused by Brier and Lebbin. Actually, in some ways I have been comforted because I've observed that I am not alone in my PowerPoint design errors. Unfortunately, most presenters do not deviate from the traditional text-heavy slides that were once so comfortably familiar to me. I have rarely encountered a presentation that has incorporated video clips or other media into their PowerPoint or provided a non-linear presentation. It seems that many of us could benefit from a re-examination of how we construct our PowerPoints.

Conclusions

Unlike some conference sessions that simply offer a quick jumpstart or idea session, Brier and Lebbin's session provided me with a new framework for designing PowerPoints that I have used to challenge myself and colleagues at my institution. It has allowed me to create

PowerPoint slides that compliment my presentations and classes, rather than textually controlling them. While I have progressed a great deal in my presentation design, there are always opportunities for improvement. That's where the concept of lifelong learning can be applied.

In addition to learning valuable techniques for presentations, I have also learned to be more open-minded about conference sessions and to challenge myself to attend some that I ordinarily would not. This conference session extended far beyond its one hour session...it changed forever how I will design PowerPoints.

Editor's Note:

An article on Brier and Lebbin's research has been accepted in Reference & User Services Quarterly (RUSQ) with anticipated publication in Volume 48, Number 4 (Summer 2009).