Evaluating multimedia presentations

A PowerPoint presentation is just another form of communication, and the same rules apply to multimedia that apply to writing or verbal communication. And remember that multimedia is only one part of a complete presentation — it's not a substitute for verbal communication, handouts, and answering questions from the audience.

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I don't like PowerPoint. I'm happy to admit that; in fact I proclaim it loudly whenever I have the opportunity. PowerPoint became popular because it made presentations easy, but I would argue that it makes them *too* easy, encouraging and enabling presenters to dumb down what they have to say, letting the slides speak for them and condensing complicated arguments into simplistic bullet points from which the audience is continually distracted by a jumble of irrelevant images, sounds, and animations.

It doesn't have to be this way — and if we're going to use PowerPoint in the classroom, we can't *allow* it to be this way. It's possible to use PowerPoint as part of a presentation that is thoughtful, educational, and encouraging of higher-order thinking[1], that gives students a chance to apply, synthesize, and evaluate information rather than merely reciting it, that opens the door to debate rather than closing it. But to do that, we have to keep it in its proper context. PowerPoint can be a powerful tool for enhancing good presentations, but it's not a crutch for poor ones. A multimedia presentation is just another form of communication, and the same rules apply to multimedia that apply to writing or verbal communication: consider your audience, keep your topic in mind, and so on. And remember that multimedia is only one part of a complete presentation — it's not a substitute for verbal communication, handouts, and answering questions from the audience.

So when you use PowerPoint or ask your students to use it, think carefully about what your educational purpose is, and *always keep that in mind*. Don't let the typical style of PowerPoint drive your content and educational purpose; put the content *first* and find a style that reflects it.

Four rules for multimedia presentations in education

When you consider adding a multimedia aid such as a slideshow to your presentation, or ask students to create a multimedia presentation, keep these four rules in mind.

1. COMMUNICATION IS EVERYTHING.

First, always remember that **a presentation aid is a vehicle for communication**. It is not a work of art unto itself. It is not designed *primarily* to entertain or to display artistry, though artistry and entertainment can aid communication. Before you design a presentation — whether or not you use multimedia software — ask yourself *What am I trying to communicate?* What ideas, information, or emotions do you want your audience to take away? (Before you assign your students a presentation, ask yourself what you want them to communicate — and make sure they ask themselves the same question.)

Every decision you make from that point forward should take into account the answer to that question. Does the music from *Chariots of Fire* communicate something important about your topic, or is it just pleasant to listen to? If the latter, it's irrelevant and therefore distracting. Does that piece of clip art communicate anything at all, beyond the fact that the presenter owns a nifty collection of clip art? Do flying and exploding slides enhance communication or merely distract your audience?

Eschewing clip art doesn't necessarily mean avoiding visuals or being boring. Consider taking original photographs or creating custom diagrams that serve literally to *illustrate* your topic rather than merely to decorate it. Then, explain those images verbally in your presentation and invite the audience to ask questions about them.

2. TECHNOLOGY IS ONLY A TOOL.

If the slideshow has no value apart from its content, neither does the technology. We have an obligation to teach not just the use of technology but the **appropriate use of technology**. Before you use presentation software to teach something or ask your students to use it in a presentation, ask yourself: *Does the use of multimedia presentation software add value to the presentation?* If you can't name the way in which the presentation is enhanced by the use of multimedia slides, *don't use them*. You're wasting your time and your students' time.

This principle extends to all classroom use of technology and, for that matter, to any product you could ask students to create to demonstrate their knowledge or to share it with their peers. Whether it's a database, a spreadsheet, a Web page, a traditional oral presentation, or something visual like a poster or a diorama, ask yourself what value the medium adds to the content. Does the medium enhance the content? Communicate it more effectively than a simpler medium (such as text or speech)? Make it easier to analyze and evaluate content you needed to work with anyway? If not, why choose that medium?

I realize that the curriculum demands that we teach students to create multimedia presentations. But they shouldn't be taught in isolation, because they won't (or shouldn't) be used in isolation in real life. You might consider giving students several options for visual aids for their presentation, and ask them to choose the format most appropriate to their content — and then assess them on the effectiveness of their choice. We commonly

teach students to choose which type of graph (bar, pie, etc.) is most appropriate to their data; why not teach this skill for other kinds of visual aids as well?

3. COMMUNICATION GOES BOTH WAYS.

Third, because everything in a K–12 classroom is supposed to be a learning experience, **encourage discussion and debate** about presentations. The impact of PowerPoint is often to shut down conversation, not to facilitate it, because while you can argue with a person, you can't argue with sound bytes. Think about the phrase "bullet points" — as if you're shooting ideas at your audience, which in a way you are. Don't shoot ideas at your students, and don't let your students shoot ideas at one another! Only so much information will fit on a PowerPoint slide, so presenters should *always elaborate orally on the text and images* in their presentations, and the audience should be expected to *listen and respond thoughtfully* to that oral elaboration — not just to the bullet points on the screen.

To facilitate interaction between presenter and audience, consider adding question cues or discussion prompts to the slideshow. Special slides could offer topics for discussion, specific questions, or simply an invitation to the audience ("Questions?"). Discussion slides could have a common appearance that sets them off from the rest of the slideshow and lets the audience know that their contribution is wanted.

4. MAKE YOUR ASSESSMENT REFLECT YOUR PRIORITIES.

Finally, when you evaluate students' presentations, **judge the content first**. It's tempting, and easy, to give lots of points for artfully designed slides and clever use of clip art. But remember our first two rules: *it's not about the presentation*, at least not primarily. So, when designing a rubric for multimedia presentations:

1. Judge the content first. *What has the student learned?*
2. Next, judge the communication. *How effectively does the presentation communicate what the student has learned?*
3. Last, judge the presentation. *How effective is the presentation as a presentation?*

In short, you can evaluate a multimedia presentation essentially the way you would a piece of writing, with the content of the writing first and the mechanics (grammar and spelling) last. You might want to think about presentations in terms of a version of the Five Features of Effective Writing[2]: focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions, in that order.

The ~~five~~ six features of effective ~~writing~~ presentations: a rubric

Here's a (rough) rubric for evaluating multimedia presentations based on the features of effective writing. Elementary teachers may want to ramp down the level of expectations, but the principles remain the same. And remember, if you're trying to improve a presentation rather than merely grade it, think about the features in this order. If you don't have a focus, you don't have anything! (A note: to make the rubric clearer, I've used plain — and

occasionally blunt — English. Obviously, you'd want to tone down the comments if you're evaluating student work.)

FOCUS

What's the point of this presentation? What primary information is the presenter trying to convey, what argument is he/she making? How clearly does the presentation reflect the focus? Ignore the appearance of the slides for the moment.

- **4 points** — The presentation had a clear and consistent focus. I came away knowing exactly what point the presenter was trying to make.
- **3 points** — By the time he/she finished, I understood the presenter's point clearly, but I had some doubts along the way.
- **2 points** — I am fairly certain what point the presenter was trying to make, but I'd like further clarification.
- **1 point** — On further reflection, I think I can figure out what the point of this presentation was, but I shouldn't have to work this hard.
- **0 points** — I have absolutely no idea what this person was talking about.

ORGANIZATION

Are the slides presented in an order that makes logical sense and supports the *focus* of the presentation? Is the overall plan of the presentation evident and consistent? Is the information on each slide presented in a logical manner, with clear titles, headings, paragraphs, and bulleted or numbered lists?

- **4 points** — At every point in the presentation, I knew exactly where the presenter was and where we had been, and I had a sense of where we were going. I never lost sight of the presenter's focus.
- **3 points** — I generally knew where the presenter was and where he/she was headed, but there were a couple of places where I was a little confused. Some of the slides may not have been clear, and a couple seemed outside the focus of the presentation.
- **2 points** — I was never totally lost during the presentation, but several of the slides were unclear or confusing, and there were several places where I wasn't sure where the presenter was headed. Several of the slides seemed to deviate from the main point, and it was sometimes difficult to tell what was a page title, what was a heading, and what was regular text.
- **1 point** — By the time the presenter finished, I understood what the focus was, but most of the slides seemed jumbled.
- **0 points** — I was lost during most of the presentation. Few if any of the slides seemed logical when presented.

SUPPORT AND ELABORATION

Is there enough supporting information or arguments in the presentation to make the main point effectively? Were any of the slides (or the content on the slides) irrelevant to the presentation's focus? Consider not only text but images. If images accompany the text of slides, do they support the presenter's point, or are they merely decorative? If the presenter

summarized his/her argument with bullet points, did he/she elaborate on them orally or merely read what was on the screen?

- **4 points** — There was plenty of supporting information, evidence, images, etc. to make the presenter's point. I am thoroughly convinced!
- **3 points** — The presenter provided enough support for his/her argument, but some images seemed extraneous or purely decorative, and a couple of bullet points needed further clarification.
- **2 points** — There was a fair amount of supporting information, but it was too sparse. The presenter did not sufficiently elaborate on many of the bullet points, and the images added little to my understanding of the issue.
- **1 point** — The presenter relied too heavily on short bullet points in the multimedia presentation and didn't provide sufficient oral elaboration. The images were purely decorative and added nothing to my understanding of the issue.
- **0 point** — The presenter gave virtually no evidence at all for his/her argument. And what was with that clip art?!?

STYLE

With respect to a multimedia presentation, *style* refers both to the style of the writing and to the appearance of the slides. Do word choice, sentence fluency, and voice reflect the presenter's purpose and audience? (See our article on style[3] for an explanation of what these terms mean and how to evaluate them.) Similarly, do the layout and design of the slides, the fonts, and the images reflect the presenter's purpose and audience? If it's a serious presentation, for example, fonts should carry some visual weight — go with something simple, like Times or Verdana, rather than something cute like Chalkboard — and amateurish clip art should be avoided in favor of images that convey meaning and thoughtfulness of purpose. The layout of the slides — placement of headers and titles, for example — should be clear and free of ornament that distracts from the content of the presentation. Obviously, clashing colors or color schemes involving more than three or four colors should be avoided in almost any case.

In short, *keep it simple*. Certainly you want the appearance of the slides to be interesting, and the presenter's personal voice can still come through, but the content has to come first. Unnecessary clip art, overly bright and distracting colors, big headers that crowd the text of pages, and so on will only distract the audience. There's plenty of room for embellishment in the accompanying oral presentation.

- **4 points** — The text and the visual design were clear, interesting, and appropriate to the purpose and audience of the presentation. Fonts, colors, etc. seemed well chosen to reflect the presenter's purpose and aided in my ability to process the visual content of the presentation.
- **3 points** — The text and visual design were clear and interesting but somewhat inconsistent in style. Although the design may not have distracted from the content, it also did not enhance my ability to understand the presentation.
- **2 points** — The layout and color choices distracted somewhat from the content of the presentation, and some of the images were purely decorative and seemed out of place.

At times I found myself staring at the screen and forgetting what the presenter was talking about. The text of the slides was reasonably clear but uninteresting.

- **1 point** — Fonts and colors were inconsistent; text was dull and inappropriate to the presenter's purpose (too informal, for example).
- **0 points** — Colors, fonts, and layout seemed almost random. The design was confusing and made it difficult to understand (or even find) the content of the presentation.

CONVENTIONS

For a multimedia presentation, this includes the conventions of writing (grammar, spelling, and usage) as well as the layout of slides, legibility, and timing. Was the text free of errors in grammar, spelling, and usage? Had the presenter edited carefully or were there sloppy errors? Was the layout of the pages consistent and clean? Was the text easily readable, and headings clearly distinguished from regular text? (When we evaluate fonts with respect to conventions, we're looking just at whether they're readable, not whether they're attractive or otherwise suitable to the presentation.) Notice that I have assigned only one-fifth of the total points to *all* of these qualities together. You may think this is extreme, and of course you're free to change it.

- **4 points** — The presentation was easy to read; text was free of errors.
- **3 points** — There were one or a few errors in grammar, spellling, or usage, but they did not detract from the content. Text was clear and easily readable.
- **2 points** — There were several errors in grammar, spelling, or usage. Text was not as readable as it could have been — the face may have been "cute" rather than readable, or the size may have been too small for ease of reading. Some images may have been difficult to see. Layout of the slides may not have been consistent throughout the presentation, resulting in some confusion.
- **1 point** — The presentation was riddled with sloppy errors that detracted from the content. The layout of the slides was inconsistent and made comprehension difficult, and the text was often difficult to read.
- **0 points** — Problems with grammar, spelling, usage, layout, and font choices made this presentation nearly incomprehensible.

(AND ONE MORE:) PRESENTATION SKILLS

Because PowerPoint presentations need to be accompanied by a real, live human being to be effective (be honest now — have you ever *really* learned anything from one of these awful printouts of PowerPoint slides?), you'll need to evaluate the presenter's skill in speaking and in responding to the audience. To cover that fully would require another article and another rubric, but consider the following in how the oral portion of the presentation relates to the multimedia portion: Did the presenter rely on the text on the screen, or did he/she clearly understand and communicate information and ideas a couple of levels deeper than mere bullet points? Did he/she read the text on the screen or speak independently, leaving the bullet points merely for the audience's reference? How did he/she respond to questions from the audience — with confidence or with uncertainty? by

repeating the bullet points in the presentation or by elaborating with additional information or a new perspective?

- **4 points** — The presenter gave a clear, thorough, convincing presentation apart from the PowerPoint. The PowerPoint enhanced the presentation and was useful as a reference, but I felt that the presentation would still have been quite good without it. The presenter welcomed questions from the audience and responded thoughtfully.
- **3 points** — The presenter spoke well and with confidence but occasionally read bullet points without sufficient elaboration. In some cases, he/she diverted from the "script" a little too much — I was uncertain of the connection between what he/she was saying and the information on the screen. His/her responses to questions were good but could have been stronger.
- **2 points** — The presenter spoke with some confidence but relied heavily on the text on the screen. This probably would not have been a strong, coherent presentation without the PowerPoint to hold it together.
- **1 point** — The presenter mostly read the bullet points on the screen, only occasionally elaborating on them. He/she looked at the screen as much as at the audience and faltered when responding to questions from the audience or speaking independently.
- **0 points** — The presenter merely read the bullet points on the screen, then referred back to them in response to questions. It seemed almost as though he/she had never seen the PowerPoint before today.

Teaching students to evaluate presentations

If you assign and evaluate multimedia presentations thoughtfully, you'll not only help students to design and give presentations more effectively. You'll also help them to develop the ability to evaluate other people's presentations — which may be an even more critical skill. Students may give few formal presentations in their lives, but they'll watch plenty of them — in the form of television news, political speeches, and so on. Critically evaluating their own presentations will help them learn to see through the razzle-dazzle when they're watching a presentation in which the accompanying visuals are as likely to obscure the facts as to illuminate them.

To encourage students to think more critically about presentations, you might ask students to evaluate one another's presentations based on this rubric. Of course, you'll want to make sure that their criticisms are offered constructively. If you're worried that students will be too negative with one another, show them a clip of a television news broadcast, instead: pretend that it's a PowerPoint presentation and evaluate it as a class. It might be a learning experience for the teacher, too!

More rubrics for evaluating multimedia presentations

These rubrics, guides, and articles provide additional means of evaluating PowerPoint and other multimedia presentations.

Jamie McKenzie, "Scoring Power Points[4]," in *From Now On*[5] 10:1 (September 2000). Arguing against PowerPoint as a goal in itself and technology for technology's sake, McKenzie gives detailed guidelines for creating PowerPoint presentations that are clear, interesting, logical, and effective at communicating ideas.

PowerPoint Rubric[6] from the University of Wisconsin. Designed for self-assessment and peer feedback, this rubric covers the entire process of presentation design, from research to storyboarding to writing, content, and graphic design. Also includes a section for evaluating teamwork.

Multimedia Mania Rubric[7] from Multimedia Mania! 2004 at North Carolina State University. Focuses on design, organization, and technical issues but is quite thorough in addressing those areas.

Multimedia Rubric[8] from Raymond Pastore of Bloomsburg University. Adapted from the Multimedia Mania rubric. Designed for the college level, this rubric assumes or encourages the use of audio and video in addition to text and images.

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Notes

1. See http://www.learnnc.org/glossary/higher-order+thinking.
2. See http://www.learnnc.org/articles/few-features.
3. See http://www.learnnc.org/articles/few-style.
4. See http://www.fno.org/sept00/powerpoints.html.
5. See http://www.fno.org.
6. See http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/profdev/pptrubric.html.
7. See http://www.ncsu.edu/mmania/mm_docs/mm_judge_rubric2.html.
8. See http://teacherworld.com/multimediarubric.html.

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