Using PowerPoint

When we prepare a PowerPoint presentation for the learning session, we forget that
it might easily be the second, third or even fourth time that day that learners have
been exposed to this resource. 'Death by PowerPoint', is a result of this program
being used in dull, didactic sessions where teachers bring up a succession of slides
and talk learners through them. Trainee teachers are warned of the dangers of 'chalk
and talk'; the new hazard is 'click and talk.' Whilst there are no recorded cases of
'Death by PowerPoint' there are certainly instances in which learners have been
bored into a state resembling death quite closely. PowerPoint used in this way is
nothing more than a 'posh' use of OHTs, especially if learners are required to copy
the content of each slide. Excessive reliance on this program, like excessive use of
OHTs, can have a 'distancing' effect in that it separates teachers from learners and
comes between them. In the worst instances, teachers stop being teachers and just
operators of technology and readers of slides.

A critique of PowerPoint

PowerPoint is a useful tool, but don't let it become the only tool in your box. Like
other resources, it's there to support teaching and learning not to dictate the form
and structure of it. So what's wrong with this technology? Basically, nothing; it's how
is used that's the problem. In one of the first critiques of PowerPoint, Edward Tufte
(2006:13, original emphasis) claims that, "The core ideas of teaching – *explanation,
reasoning, finding things out, questioning, content, evidence, credible authority not
patronizing authoritarianism* - are contrary to the cognitive style of PowerPoint." Tufte

goes as far as to assert that 'bullet outlines can make us stupid." The main criticism is that PowerPoint encourages, almost compels, teachers to adopt a linear structure. Such linear structures, organised around bulleted lists and stock PowerPoint templates with, frequently annoying or irrelevant, Clipart, can all too easily reinforce teacher-dominated sessions with learners as mere 'viewers' probably not even bothering to take notes because they know they will be given a printout of the slides. Teachers in the lifelong learning sector are becoming more familiar with constructivist learning theory and the importance of finding ways to help learners construct and critique their own learning. A useful method to support this kind of activity is a concept map, a device which doesn't feature on PowerPoint templates. Constructivist learning and teaching and concept maps show learners that knowledge and ideas exist in complex and changing networks, not in the simple linear steps which the basis of a PowerPoint presentation.

Towards a more creative use of PowerPoint

Having apparently demolished the potential of this resource, we can now consider how it can be used effectively in teaching and learning. The best use of PowerPoint involves using it in a way which provides a framework for the session. If there are things that you would regularly write on a whiteboard in more or less the same way, you could put them on to PowerPoint slide; the slides then become a backdrop to the session rather than the main focus of it.

The judicious use of bullet points can be a useful device for summarising the key points of a topic or of a learning session and it's a good technique to use custom animation to introduce them one-by-one. You should remember to include learners'

summary points otherwise it just gives the appearance that the teacher knows all the answers. PowerPoint can used successfully with an interactive whiteboard to add learners' points and convert them to text.

Activity

Analyse and evaluate one of your own PowerPoint presentations. Consider, for example:

- How many slides are there? Do you need that many?
- Is it a 'framework' for the session or does it include most of the content?
- How 'crowded' are the slides? (See the design hints for using PowerPoint)
- Are the learners passive or does the presentation encourage activity and involvement?
- Ask your learners what they think about the use of PowerPoint

Design hints for PowerPoint slides

- Font size should be 24pt minimum. Design templates are often set with 40pt for titles and 28pt for body text; this can be too much, so feel free to adjust it
- Line spacing should ideally be 1.5 or even double. As with OHTs, avoid too many lines per slide, perhaps 6 maximum.
- Avoid too much content. Slides which are crowded with text and/or graphics can be too 'noisy' and make it difficult for learners to see the main points. Remember – less is more!
- PowerPoint provides some nice design packages which automatically adjust and coordinate design, colour and font. However, you should consider designing your own, especially if you want a 'corporate image'.

- White backgrounds can be too dazzling; use a gentler, pastel shade. Some font colours, particularly bright and light ones, are difficult to read. It's generally best to stick to dark colours for fonts. If you have learners with dyslexia or sight difficulties ask them what they prefer so that you can design slides to suit them.

Be creative with PowerPoint. It can do a lot of things which many teachers don't even know about, let alone use. Features include: action buttons; animation; incorporation of video and sound; hyperlinks to other presentations, programs and websites. Try designing a PowerPoint package which is non-sequential and gives you the opportunity to go to different places in the presentation using action buttons. I've designed a package on using thinking skills where I can choose a topic area from the introductory page and go to it by action buttons. You can develop packages which use 'drag and drop' as matching exercises and invite people up to the board to use them. You can also use reveal techniques to uncover answers to a quiz or an assessment or to uncover concealed information. Using action buttons you can devise assessments or quizzes where people select an answer to a question and the button reveals the right or wrong answer with explanations and further information.

Reference

Tufte, E. R. (2006) *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching out the Corrupts Within* Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press LLC