

Using PowerPoint in Law School Classes and on the Web
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Beginning about three years ago, I developed a series of PowerPoint slides to accompany each day's class session for four of the five classes that I teach (excepting only my small writing seminar). As I began this venture, I shared the general concerns expressed by others that such a pervasive use of visual media in class might skew instruction, suppress discussion or questions, or over-simplify the material. In fact, while those dangers still exist and depend largely upon how the technology is used, I have found that my use of PowerPoint slides significantly enhances learning and also facilitates and organizes discussion.

I have developed a continuing series of PowerPoint slides to provide general summaries and lists of issues or points for discussion in each class. In sum, these visual guides serve as headings to organize class discussion. In fact, given the limited space available for text on any particular PowerPoint slide, it is impossible to be comprehensive or overly detailed. Students thus should be left with no impression that the slides are everything or could adequately substitute for a complete analysis of a particular case or set of materials. For the most part, the slides provide the kind of outlines, charts, or bullet points that I would put up on the chalk-board during a class session, if I had the ability to write that quickly. Indeed, in developing the slides initially, I drew upon my notes from prior years regarding what I planned to write on the chalkboard during a class session. (For that matter, as necessary for variation or to chart something out on the fly or develop a tangent during class, I still resort occasionally to the chalkboard-right alongside the PowerPoint slide being projected on the screen).

PowerPoint slides necessarily are more legible and hopefully are more interesting than chalk-board scribbling (at least with my poor handwriting). By virtue both of the medium and the required preparation time, a set of PowerPoint slides inevitably will be more polished and professional looking than chalkboard notes or even most handouts. In terms of creating a new PowerPoint slide or revising an existing one, I have to give careful thought before each class as to what I will be doing and how class likely will develop. I then continually revise those slides after class (in anticipation of the following year), responding to what actually did happen in class. In terms of adding visual interest, as I have revised the slides from year to year, I have attempted when possible to add images or pictures along with text. For this purpose, I have subscribed to an on-line graphics provider, which offers a searchable database of images that may be downloaded without

copyright infringement (thus making it unnecessary even to consider whether borrowing an image would constitute fair-use in teaching).

After each day's class session or after concluding a particular set of materials, I then post the PowerPoint slides on a web page that I maintain for each class. (I post these slides only after the fact, with the expectation that students will not rely upon the general information on the slides as a substitute for full preparation by reading the material. To be sure, there is some risk that a student will gain prior access to these slides by obtaining them from students in last year's class, but little of that appears to have occurred.) Thus, in contrast with chalkboard notes which disappear immediately after class, my students have access to these PowerPoint slides when they review their notes shortly after class as well as later in the semester when studying for exams. Indeed, as I discuss further below, students need not be as concerned to write everything down immediately in class, given that they know it will be readily available to review later from their own computer with internet access when they get home at the end of the day.

By posting these slides to the web, am I giving students too much assistance? Are the posted slides unduly influencing the course of student study before exams? Before I used PowerPoint slides and posted them on the web, I found students spending large sums of money and even more quantities of time on flash-cards, commercial outline books, etc. At the very least, surely it is better that many students now choose to eschew (or reduce time and money spent on) commercial quick-fixes and return instead to the very PowerPoint bullet points and summaries that were used in their classes. In this way, I hope and believe that students are focusing more upon reviewing what actually happened in class and thus that their study approach is more directly tailored to their actual educational experience.

What is the effect of this regular use of visual images on student discussion and participation in the classroom? As noted above, I shared at the outset the concern of some that passivity might result and thus carefully assessed what was happening in each class when I used slides before I continued to devote the hundreds of hours required to calibrate a complete set of slides for the entire semester. Contrary to fears, my perception is that student discussion has increased; in any event, it has not declined. I believe that the visual images often have the effect of provoking a student comment or evoking a question that otherwise might not occur to a student. Even more importantly, for a student who otherwise is reluctant to participate in class because he or she has difficulty organizing thoughts, the slides serve to outline the progression of ideas in our discussion and thereby allow that student to join in with a follow-up comment or question. Moreover, since I can use the slides to deal rapidly with preliminary or basic aspects of a topic or a case, we as a class can then focus upon the more complicated or controversial implications. In fact, as noted above, because I post the slides on my

web site after class, I often tell students to put down their pens, stop taking notes, and instead listen, think, and participate. Because they <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu/lessons/lesnov02.php> 10/31/2006 know that the bullet-points of the slides will be available on the web after class, they feel more comfortable in resisting the urge to transcribe the class in their notes and instead are more willing join in the discussion.

Finally, visual technology heightens the educational experience. Research on learning repeatedly confirms the importance of reinforcing oral instruction (even if that aural aspect of learning involves a dialogue) with something visual. For most (if not all) students, I find that they regard class as more dynamic and exciting when visual technology is added, especially for topics that otherwise are dry and technical. If using PowerPoint slides or other visual techniques better maintains student attention, then anything that happens in class is more likely to have a lasting impact. I definitely find fewer students fading or drifting away during a class session; visual technology captures and holds attention more effectively. And, of course, I occasionally vary techniques in class, so everything is not "All PowerPoint, All the Time"; some topics or segments of materials do not lend themselves as well to this technique.

Based upon this successful experience, have my colleagues eagerly followed suit? Not yet, but use of technology in the classroom here at Drake is slowly increasing. (As some have noted, student-pressure also will push more and more faculty to move in this direction, as our students come from undergraduate classes in which PowerPoint and other visual technology is used regularly.) The sobering fact of the matter is that it takes some time (although relatively little) to learn the technology and then takes considerably more time to prepare good slides for regular use. With the many demands on faculty time, it is understandable that most are leery of undertaking such a time-intensive project. Moreover, given the plethora of creative approaches to teaching, other faculty members rightly will make different choices and devote their energies in alternative directions. In the end, technology cannot substitute for careful class preparation and, if done reasonably well, will probably increase the time necessary for preparation. In my initial developments of sets of slides, I devoted at least two and sometimes as many as four hours to preparing slides for a single hour of class. (Of course, once having created a set of slides, the burden for revision when teaching the course again the following year is much lighter.) Yes, that initial investment of time and energy is daunting. But at the same time, I found the time spent to be valuable, as it required me to give more detailed thought to the way in which class study of a topic was organized and progressed through discussion. Not since teaching a course for the first time had I devoted so much time and effort to class preparation. Accordingly, if adoption of some form of technology in the

classroom pushes each of us to engage in an intensive re-evaluation of our instruction, that in itself can only be a positive result for educational quality.