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How (and why) to Kill Voice-over PowerPoint in Online Teaching

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Two years ago I decided to kill voice-over PowerPoint as an online teaching tool. It wasn't nearly as hard to kill as I thought it would be. And, for good reasons, I won't go back.

If you are new to online teaching, someone will inevitably suggest voice-over PowerPoint as a core component of online course design. They may even insist it is an "easy" entry into online teaching. When I started teaching online graduate seminary courses in theology, I relied heavily on voice-over PowerPoint. I used it for several consecutive years. But not anymore. Voice-over PowerPoint is taxing, redundant, and rigid for both instructors and students. More important, it doesn't support productive or engaged learning online.

Voice-over PowerPoint allows an instructor to design a visual presentation and then record narration or lecture content in sync with the slides. Thankfully, individual slides can be re-recorded without starting over from the beginning. In the narration recording, the instructor controls when the slides advance for the viewer. In online courses, typically the file is converted into streaming video that can be posted for students to view. Slightly more sophisticated tools (Prezi, Screencast-O-Matic, Camtasia, etc.) provide non-linear options or include video.

At first glance, these tools simulate residential classroom practices. In residential courses,

PowerPoint can enhance learning by adding visual content, important textual information, and helpful organization and pacing. Constructing PowerPoint presentations without voice-over narration is relatively straightforward, and most residential classrooms have appropriate technology support. In residential classrooms, I use PowerPoint to support interactive lecturing, which includes collaborative in-the-moment conversation, clarification, and imagination. Recreating residential patterns for using PowerPoint therefore seems to make sense in the habitat of online teaching and learning, but there are uncomfortable surprises. Voice-over PowerPoint is time intensive, not easily updated, and it tends to lock-in problematic course design.

Voice-over PowerPoint is more time consuming when it is an online course component. Even if you are not a stickler for articulate and well-paced narration, it takes substantial time to get it right. Rendering voice-over PowerPoint files to streaming files takes considerable computer processing time. The first time I rendered a video, my computer was locked and unresponsive for six hours. With adequate technology support services, the process can move faster. Yet this means working on lectures well ahead of time, and many instructors lack adequate technical support. In addition, once a PowerPoint is rendered into streaming video, any changes, even very small changes, are incredibly cumbersome and frustrating to implement. One colleague of mine finds rendering videos so exasperating that she works from the tight space of her bedroom closet where she can curse and pound the walls every time her laptop computer crashes. On one occasion it crashed seven consecutive times.

In course evaluations and check-ins, my online students have reported that voice-over PowerPoint feels laborious and redundant while residential students often found it helpful. The difference has to do with how online students multitask and manage fulltime work environments while pursuing education. Online learners prefer content they can listen to or watch without long stationary stretches at a computer in a solely receptive rather than interactive mode. When PowerPoint is content heavy and stretches beyond 15 minutes, students report being confused and frustrated. For example, they struggled to take notes while watching and listening because both tasks required the same screen. I responded by providing copies of slides and note-taking guides, but the situation and frustrations did not improve.

Relying heavily on voice-over PowerPoint lecturing is not good online pedagogy. In residential contexts it can be interactive and invitational, but online it is one-directional and redundant. Instructors spend a lot of time putting together content not easily updated or augmented. Students spend a lot of time tediously copying down content, memorizing content, and repeating it on an exam. This kind of copying and rehearsing is labor intensive. And in the end, it does not mean students can demonstrate how new information or paradigms are useful, fruitful, or relevant. The learning patterns of redundancy don't truly engage a learner or enhance a learner's agency.

Thus, no matter how much time you have already invested, it is wise to avoid relying heavily on voice-over PowerPoint and equivalent tools. Instead, consider these alternative best practices for promoting productive and engaged learning online.

- Try moving PowerPoint content to course pages. Course page content can include images, links, and embedded PDF readings. Components and texts can be easily updated and corrected by the instructor. Page content can be saved and transferred if your course platform changes.
- Make sure the information you want to convey to students is not already available from trusted online sources or trusted scholars. Curate, rather than recreate, the best resources to avoid redundant faculty work. In the discipline of theology, this introduces students to a wider range of voices, generously celebrates other scholars' expertise, and models how and where to find good theological information online.
- Incorporate interactive learning activities that invite students into the learning process in ways voice-over lectures cannot. For example, one of my objectives in an online Christology course is to raise critical awareness around how images of Jesus can support nationalism, injustice, violence, and racism. I used to provide images in PowerPoint presentation. Now I ask students to go in search of images and post them to a digital bulletin board (such as Padlet). Subsequently students move through page content, external links, and course reading. Afterwards, students return to their posted images and comment on what they have learned, see differently, or want to ask. Due to this small design change, learning became engaged and interactive while requiring far less time-intensive setup. I also widened my own pool of online images.
- Use short (approximately 10 minutes) recorded video segments to orient students to the content, learning, and objectives you have in mind for a whole course or course module. Basic computer apps and programs support short videos student can watch, listen, or download. Resist the editing impulse and keep it real. This allows students to hear and feel an instructor's presence as an important point of orientation.
- Use PowerPoint or related tools sparingly for short forays into content that will not likely need updating. When slide presentation is crucial for course design, consider alternative tools such as VoiceThread which allow students to comment, respond, or ask questions of the instructor in ways embedded in the slide presentation. (There is a yearly fee for VoiceThread, but it may be worth the expense.)

Two years ago I killed voice-over PowerPoint in online teaching, and I won't go back. The kill meant eliminating a central source of my own and student frustration. Not one student has complained about its absence, and the new course design gets strong reviews. Better strategies and shifting imagination have resulted in more sustainable online teaching and learning practices. Best of all, instead of repeating my recorded words and imitating my own voice, students are learning to exercise their own. And I get to see and evaluate more accurately what they are truly learning.

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