Home (/en) » Publications (/en/publications) » Articles (/en/publications/articles) » Researching Best
Presentation Practices and Sharing of PowerPoints

Publications

A | A

ARTICLES

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Researching Best Presentation Practices and Sharing of PowerPoints

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Presentation software is a ubiquitous part of lecturing in the college network. When shared
with students, the presentation slides can be a very useful tool for students, and particularly
for those who have special needs. The Adaptech Research Network recently conducted a
series of focus groups on presentation approaches and sharing of slides that involved
students, teachers and professional staff. The team invited Profweb to a meeting at the end
of the Fall 2017 semester to share their initial findings.

Adaptech Research Network team members (from left to right): Maegan Harvison, Mary Jorgensen, Alice Havel, Laura King, Catherine Fichten and Alex Lussier

The Research Project

According to its website (http://adaptech.org/en/about) , the Adaptech Research Network conducts research involving college and university students with a variety of disabilities in Canada. A recent area of interest has been the use and accessibility of information and communication technologies in postsecondary education. The research team consists of academics, students and consumers.

Adaptech's Catherine Fichten successfully applied for and received a grant through the S024 (http://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/contenu/documents_soutien/Ens_Sup/Collegial/ RegimeBudFin_Cegep/Regime_bud_cegep_2017-2018_v25.pdf) budget annex of the *Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur* annual budget. In 2017-2018 $ 24M was allocated to support college students with a disability (*Accessibilité au collégial des*

étudiants en situation de handicap). Access to funding has recently been revised and expanded to include students who have an average lower than 70%, second language learners, and members of First Nations.

Since the approach to using PowerPoint or other presentation software varies greatly from one teacher to another, the Adaptech Research Network felt it was important to learn more about the optimal use of this technology. The research question for the project revolved around whether the preferences and needs of students are matched by the approach the teachers are using, or whether there is a discrepancy.

The research project is organized into 3 phases:

Phase 1

Literature search and organization of focus groups with students, teachers and professional staff

Phase 2

Creation of a questionnaire

Phase 3

Administering the questionnaire, analyzing the data and disseminating results

As part of the Phase I focus groups, the students that were interviewed may have had special needs but did not always self-identify as such. The research team worked with second year Social Science students who had taken a variety of courses with a number of different teachers.

As for the teachers, like the students, they were all from the Social Science program. A number of fields were represented such as Psychology, Business and Religion.

The professionals were interviewed to bring another perspective to the research. Personnel working with either students or teachers were invited to the focus group.

As of December 2017, the team has completed Phase 1 and Phase 2 and will be administering the questionnaire in classrooms in the coming months. Given that the focus group interviews have already provided a wealth of insight, team leader Laura King (who organized the focus groups) felt it was important to share with the college network what Adaptech has learned.

What Students Are Saying

Some students with special needs may have access to note-takers as an accommodation. These note-takers find it very useful when teachers can **provide the PowerPoint slides well ahead of a class** to facilitate the note-taking process. In fact, all students can benefit from this practice.

The students appreciate when teachers post the PowerPoints on-line. At Dawson, the notes are often posted either to Moodle or Omnivox (LEA). The students don't really care about how they access the presentation. Laura King shared that the attitudes of students with regards to the use of technology in the focus groups are consistent with Adaptech's [earlier research (http://www.profweb.ca/en/publications/articles/teachers-use-of-icts-what-do-students-think)](http://www.profweb.ca/en/publications/articles/teachers-use-of-icts-what-do-students-think) which finds that students are generally positive about the use of technology in the classroom.

According to team member Alex Lussier, the **students care about the content of the PowerPoint slides**. It is important to **find a balance** between crowding slides with too much text and being too terse. Slides that contain only images are not useful for students as they may not recall the importance of the image later on, or be able to link it to concepts when they review the presentation.

Students were asked if they would prefer to have access prior to class or not, and whether the PowerPoints are useful for taking notes and helping them to study. While some students are flexible with regards to when the PowerPoint is posted on-line, many students, including **students with specific needs prefer when the presentation is posted well-ahead of the class**. This allows the student to download the presentation to their computer or to print the presentation prior to class. They can take a first look and prepare their questions for the teacher ahead of time.

The student participants stated that it is important that teachers **do not read the slides word-for-word** in class. There needs to be a **good pedagogical purpose**, and students want to learn from the teacher, not the PowerPoint slides. It is that much more important that teachers get the use of PowerPoint right, since **students will model the teachers** use of PowerPoint later on in their academic and professional careers.

Research team member Mary Jorgensen highlighted some of the best pedagogical practices that were shared by the student focus group participants. There are other **ways to use PowerPoint interactively**, rather than simply using it for information transmission:

Posting questions for in-class discussions

Conducting a pop quiz

Building up to class activities at the end of class

Structuring in-class interactions (ex. covering a certain number of slides then working on an activity, then returning to slides)

Mary noted that when PowerPoint is used to ask questions, it is a good idea for teachers to **include answers** to those questions in a subsequent slide.

What the Teachers Are Saying

Teachers in the focus group have mixed feelings about the use of technology, with some even registering negative comments in the focus group. Teachers have a great deal of pressure on them and often experience the class differently.

Technical issues are cited as one of the key problems with using PowerPoint. One teacher experienced a 25-minute delay for a class due to technical issues, which underscores the importance of preparing a *Plan B.* This will help to keep things moving when, for example, embedded video links in the presentation aren't working.

Some of the teachers recognized that they are overly-dependent on the PowerPoint slides to structure their lecture, and one teacher even prefers to take their students outside the classroom at times to break out of the presentation routine.

With regards to sharing the PowerPoint presentations, there were a few concerns that were shared by teachers, namely:

Students potentially modifying the content of the PowerPoint presentations

Copyright concerns

Possibility that students would skip class

With reference to the latter point, students who participated in the focus group stated that the **sharing of PowerPoints was not a determining factor** with regards to whether or not they attend a class. There were other factors that are external to the college which come

into play that may cause the student to be absent.

Humorously, one focus group participant also talked about the"vampire effect" of using PowerPoint. According to this teacher, turning the lights out in the room can leech the energy out of the students when the PowerPoint presentation is the only light source in a dark room. You may lose some students, and when the lights come back up, it can be a rude awakening!

What the Professionals Are Saying

The professionals who participated in the focus group all work directly with students. They had a different take on the use of PowerPoint, which they see as software that should facilitate note-taking, rather than merely presenting information. For this reason, they feel that presentations should be made available prior to class. The professionals also echoed student concerns about **too much or too little text on screen**.

The professionals were hoping that teachers would consider **adding certain things to their PowerPoint presentations in order to enhance their use** by students:

   References to pages in the course textbook

   References or hyperlinks to related handouts that are used in class

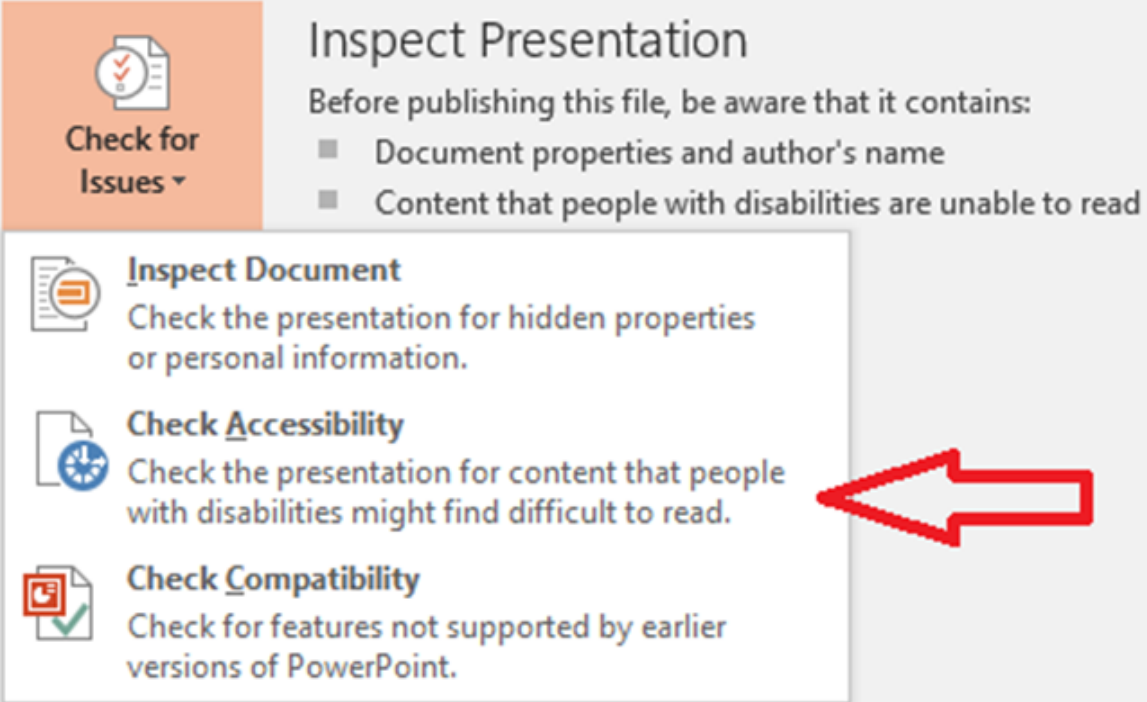   Headings and sub-headings on slides to help students navigate and understand where they are in the content

The professionals also noted that **students have a variable level of skill with taking notes**, and may not have fully developed this skill during their time at elementary or high school. The **teacher can direct the students on what they should be noting**, specifying what is a key point and what is complementary information. This will facilitate comprehension and help the student to succeed.

Improving Accessibility

The choice as to whether to share presentations is a personal one, and it is up to each teacher to weigh the benefits and the feasibility of doing so.

For those teachers that decide to share their presentations, some provide students with a version of their PowerPoint that **includes speaking notes** inside the presentation. If you wish to do this, it is important to **make the notes as comprehensible and complete** as possible.

The 'Accessibility Checker' is available from the File menu of PowerPoint 2016

It is also a good idea to provide alternate text for images for students with visual impairments or difficulty with visual processing. Interestingly, PowerPoint includes an [Accessibility Checker (https://www.ctdinstitute.org/system/files/Tip-sheet-for-Microsoft-Office-Accessibility-Checker.pdf)](https://www.ctdinstitute.org/system/files/Tip-sheet-for-Microsoft-Office-Accessibility-Checker.pdf) function that can be used to verify the level of accessibility of the presentation and make recommendations to improve accessibility.

Final Thoughts

Students and professional staff tend to see PowerPoint as a note-taking tool, while teachers view it as an organizational tool. This important distinction about the perceived intended purpose for the software can help students and teachers bridge a gap between their respective needs and responsibilities.

With more and more discussion about Universal Design for Learning (UDL), perhaps there will be an increasing interest in looking at the question of sharing presentations to help all students learn according to their preferences and profile.

Thanks to the research team for sharing your insightful findings. We're looking forward to hearing more after Phase 3 of your project!

1 comment(s)

Susie Wileman wrote February 8, 2018 at 5:06 PM

The Student AccessAbility Centre at Dawson is very pleased that the Adaptech Research Network is directing their considerable expertise to exploring the perceptions and best practices of PowerPoint presentations in the college classroom. It is important to understand the perspectives of all the stakeholders involved and we eagerly await their findings.

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