

How PowerPoint Is Killing Education

Marc Isseks

When teachers reduce curriculum content to bullet points, student learning suffers.

In the old days (10 years ago), school supervisors and administrators used to ask teachers, "Are you using technology in the classroom?" No need to ask any more—in the last decade, the tech race has gotten into full swing. With regard to classroom lessons, however, this trend has not been entirely positive. In classrooms across the United States, overheads have been scrapped and replaced with digital projectors and PowerPoint presentations. The lights have gone down, and the curtain has gone up on the bulletization of education.

In a field driven by essential questions, many school leaders and teachers have forgotten to ask the essential question, *How*

the best of all, they can store all their lessons on a portable hard drive no big

Why have so many lessons, in so many classrooms, in so many schools devolved in this fashion? One reason, and perhaps the easiest target of all, is the era of high-stakes testing. It started long before No Child Left Behind,

although that legislation poured gasoline on the fire. PowerPoint is a very effective tool for deftly "covering" material.

In a recent *New York Times* article (Bumiller, 2010), various members of the U.S. military railed against PowerPoint. They were sick and tired of their commanding officers using digital presentations to oversimplify military objectives and mission details, reducing complex directives to a handful of bulleted slides. Brigadier General H. R. McMaster called PowerPoint an internal threat. McMaster told the *Times* reporter, *It's dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control. Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable.* (p. A1)

Many classroom teachers are making the same errors that corporals and generals are making—attempting to convey convoluted and difficult information without first teaching learners the skills required to comprehend these higher-level constructs. Whether they are learning about cell reproduction or the strategy for securing the Swat Valley, people need to understand concepts. Dumbing information down promotes less understanding, not more. Most standardized tests are not designed to assess conceptual understanding. In addition, standardized assessments are now given far too frequently. Schools under pressure to cover more material and prepare for more tests are understandably limited in the amount of time they can devote to developing students' deeper understanding. It is difficult to blame an individual teacher, school, or school district for settling for "coverage" when state departments of education and the federal government have been sending out the wrong signals. For those who are unmoved by the pedagogical argument against the misuse of PowerPoint, consider for a moment the visual ergonomics of the classroom. Let us even assume (falsely) that PowerPoint is the greatest teaching tool since the invention of chalk. When projecting their presentations on a wall or screen, most classroom teachers dim or shut off the classroom lights so that students will see the projected images more clearly. If one teaches the entire lesson as a presentation, students are essentially sitting in the dark throughout the class period. How can we expect our students to perform at their peak when we create a classroom environment that is conducive to sleeping? Not to mention the potential eyestrain (Vreeman & Carroll, 2007) that can result from looking back and forth from a screen to written notes in dim light through several class periods a day.

Marc Isseks is chair of social studies at H. Frank Carey High School and coordinator of social studies at the Sewanhaka Central High School in Franklin Square, New York; misseks@sewanhaka.k12.ny.us.