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What's Wrong With This Slide? Helping students develop their presentation graphics skills from the inside out

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G.I.F.T.S.: What’s wrong with this slide? Helping students develop their presentation graphics skills from the inside out

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Originally a G.I.F.T.S. presentation at the 2013 NYSCA annual conference, Ellenville, NY.

Activity description

This activity takes an experiential learning approach toward improving students’ abilities to develop effective, visually appropriate presentation graphics and/or projected visual aids. Despite living in a world infused with nonstop visual stimulation, today’s public speaking students tend to be more adept at consuming contemporary visual media than in creating strategically effective, projected visuals for themselves. Few are knowledgeable about such subtle, yet influential, concepts as: visual theory, color theory, and aesthetics of design when they delve into the prescribed settings and “wizards” of presentation software such as Powerpoint or Prezi. Simply assigning the guidelines in the textbook does not always translate to slides that serve as clear, interesting, and easy to read enhancements to the oral message (not substitutions of or distractions from it).

Hoping that students will absorb good practices through observing and modeling what they see in other contexts won’t ensure success either. Ineffective choices are common—even among professional presenters. Some speakers know how to avoid such well-known problems as overloaded slides, reading complete sentences from the screen, using hard-to-read color/font combinations, and routinely turning off the lights. However, fewer presenters are adept at such stylistic refinements as: strategic slide transitions, custom animation to control the reveal of listed points, use of colors with complementary relationships (e.g. positioned as opposites on the “color wheel”). Pedagogically, what is needed is a conscious development of the ability to strategize one’s presentation aids through the eyes and sensibilities of one’s audience. Through a collaborative learning model, this activity allows students to experience the development of presentation visuals using a problem solving approach: deconstructing and then reconstructing slide show content.

Pedagogical Rationale

This *Great Idea For Teaching Students* utilizes an experiential, hands on approach for helping students in presentation-based courses and contexts (such as Public Speaking, Persuasion, Professional and Presentational Speech) to become sensitized to the broader visual dimensions and principles of imagery accompanying oral messages. The goal is to

introduce a perspective towards presentation graphics and all visual aids as the nonverbal enhancements to the oral message that they are. A slideshow (or any variation of projected visuals) should not be thought of as a book up on the screen—works cited list and all. It is a part of an *oral* presentation. Because of the highly visual nature of the world in which we live, this activity seeks to build on students' current sensibilities. However, they are encouraged to adopt a developer mindset in seeing their slide shows through the eyes of their listeners as tools of communication based on specific principles of cognition and design—not merely as an opportunity to create multimedia extravaganzas full of “bells & whistles.” Because it often is easier to deconstruct elements that don't work rather than intuit the more subtle, effective techniques, students are instructed to focus on task problem-solving rather than creative storytelling.

The collaborative learning approach is used to promote a synergistic effect by combining students with varying levels of visual acuity. Those possessing less sensitivity to, and awareness of, visual aesthetics will have an opportunity to perceive these factors through their more attuned classmates. In addition, the problem solving, hands-on nature of the activity encourages learning in its own right.

Procedure

This activity can be adjusted to a wide variety of class sizes and session-lengths. The initial forming of groups, distribution of materials, and presentations-of- results should occur as part of an in-class workshop structure, but the flexibility exists for additional collaborations to occur outside of class.

1. Assign appropriate readings on guidelines for visual aid technique from textbook and/or supplementary materials.
2. Divide into small teams (either randomly or using a strategic mix of skill levels).
3. Distribute random newspaper clippings as collected by instructor. Select those containing content, rather than opinion or feature story.
[Alternate procedure: Instructor distributes a particularly ineffective slide show (...can give same example to all groups or a variety of poor examples). Students' task is to determine which choices were ineffective and convert.]
4. Teams are charged to develop a four slide “slideshow” (plus title slide and end slide). They should explicitly address at least 5 specific principles: taken either from the “don'ts” mentioned in the assigned readings and/or incorporating something they've observed to be ineffective. They can choose to create the show for their current classroom setting or for a different, specific audience and context.
5. At the end of the project, teams will have an opportunity to demonstrate not only their slide show creation but also to explain the strategies underlying their structural, aesthetic, and software choices in light of their target audience.

Typical results

Students are able to become more engaged when involved in a hands-on, context specific, problem solving approach. Students use critical thinking as they coordinate three key factors involved in creating effective visual aids (enhancement to message, adaptation to audience's sensibilities, effective aesthetic design). In addition, the collaborative workshop atmosphere increases synergy, creativity, and error correction. The debriefing presentations are 15-20 minutes long and provide another opportunity for students to practice delivery techniques while using projected visuals.

References

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