

ACTING OUT IN CLASS: THE GROUP ROLE-PLAY ADVANTAGE OVER POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

By Maxine Morgan-Thomas *

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that PowerPoint has secured a stronghold in modern cultures across the globe and has invaded nearly every aspect of our lives. This is evidenced by its ubiquity and position of dominance as the instinctive choice of presentation vehicle in business settings, classrooms and unlimited types of social settings. By Microsoft's own estimation a decade ago, approximately 30 million PowerPoint presentations were being made daily by business professionals world-wide.¹ According to Clarke Caywood, an associate professor of integrated marketing at Northwestern University, more than 80% of presentations delivered by students in business schools are PowerPoint-based, "rather than the old-fashioned, flowing narrative."² The ease with which users can transform text, data, and charts to crisp, professional-looking, template-driven presentation visuals is a feature responsible for the overwhelming attraction exhibited by its users.³ While the advantages to using PowerPoint and the appropriate contexts for its use are plenty,⁴ there is concern regarding misplaced emphasis on form, at the cost of neglecting emphasis on content and the sincere pursuit of the achievement of learning objectives embedded in presentation assignments.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle astutely points out that PowerPoint teaches student-users to make points, rather than arguments; encourages presentation, rather than conversations; and that the foregoing serve to cultivate students' expectations of not being challenged.⁵ Similarly, Professor Edward Tafte adds that "thought and analysis are sacrificed for

* Maxine Morgan-Thomas, JD, CPA, Associate Professor of Business Law, Long Island University – Brooklyn. The author extends special thanks to students Jameel Hanif, Kerry Louie and Cindy Ngo for contributing to this research project by blazing the trail for the group role-play assignment with their design and delivery of an exemplary presentation, which successor students have referenced as a model.

¹ Jared Sandberg, *Death by PowerPoint: Popular Program Helps Keep Speakers on Message but Can Bore Audiences Senseless*, THE GLOBE & MAIL, Nov. 17, 2006, at C9.

² Julia Keller, *Is PowerPoint the Devil?*, TECHNOLOGY (2003), available at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/WRIT465/management/juliakeller1.htm>.

³ Cornelius B. Pratt, *The Misuse of PowerPoint*, 48 PUB. REL. Q. 20, 20 (2003).

⁴ Christine Hogan, *Preventing Death by PowerPoint*, 23 TRAINING & MGMT. DEV. METHODS 300, 303 (2009) (stating many cognitive needs – of audience members – that PowerPoint visuals are capable of addressing).

⁵ Keller, *supra* note 2.

convenience to the speaker, hurting both content and the audience.”⁶ He further remarks that “PowerPoint allows presenters to pretend they are giving a presentation,” but that it instead “corrupts serious communications.”⁷

The impetus for this paper is the author’s observance of students’ persistent misuse of PowerPoint visuals, which has had the effect of trivializing the content of their presentations and diminishing important teaching and learning opportunities designed to be derived from the presentations. In an effort to respond to the shortcomings of the current trends in oral presentations, the author considered group role-plays as a suitable replacement that would successfully aid the achievement of the goals originally set for such presentations: the development of public speaking skills, the cultivation of confidence, rigorous learning of a subject, the solidification of students’ comprehension, and the application of critical thinking skills. This paper explores the use of group role-play as an alternative method for certain PowerPoint-based presentations assignments, using the example of its implementation in two undergraduate legal studies courses – *Introduction to Law* and *Legal Environment of Business* – over the period of three semesters. The group role-play exercise was piloted in the spring 2012 semester and was again implemented in the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters.

At the outset, it was anticipated that employment of the role-play pedagogical technique would yield the following results:

- (1) Increase engagement in presentation exercises, from the perspectives of both the student-presenters and their peers in the audience;
- (2) Stimulate students’ involvement by requiring that they call on their creative abilities to write thought-provoking role-play presentation scripts that would hold the attention of their peers;
- (3) Necessitate students to study and learn the subject matter of their presentations more thoroughly and comprehensively;
- (4) Promote students’ critical thinking during the process of their role-play preparation and implementation; and

⁶ EDWARD R. TUFTE, THE COGNITIVE STYLE OF POWERPOINT: PITCHING OUT CORRUPTS WITHIN 31-32 (2nd ed. 2006); See also Jared Sandberg, *Tips for PowerPoint: -- Go Easy on the Text – Please, Spare Us*, WALL ST. J., Nov. 14, 2006, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB116346620439722193.html>. See also Keller *supra* note 2 (contending that PowerPoint organizes and condenses not only presentation material into a preconceived format, but it acts likewise upon the user’s “way of thinking about and looking at [the] material” at hand) available at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/hosterj/WRIT465/management/juliakeller1.htm>.

⁷ Tufte, *Id.*

(5) Counteract students' misperception that presentations are expected to be reduced to regurgitation exercises

Part II of this paper, which follows, discusses students' misconception of the role of PowerPoint visuals in their presentation exercises. Also, it highlights students' consequent misuse of PowerPoint. Part III explores the use of role-play in pedagogical contexts and suggests its adaptation in legal studies courses in substitution of traditional PowerPoint presentations. Part IV describes the role-play assignment the author has implemented in the *Introduction to Law* and *Legal Environment of Business* courses. Part V provides a post-implementation assessment of the pedagogical value of the role-play presentation format. Part VI offers concluding thoughts.

II. MISSING THE POINT OF POWERPOINT

Research has demonstrated a direct correlation between student's communication skills and self-confidence; furthermore, this research has also shown that self-confidence positively impacts academic achievement.⁸ In this light, oral presentation assignments play an important part not only in the development of students' public speaking skills but also in the fostering of confidence needed to both command audiences' attention and to generally fuel academic success. Such assignments are also specifically intended to facilitate students' mastery of the subjects addressed in the presentations, as well as to develop students' proficiency in using a communication technology tool that is standard in many work environments. Accordingly, PowerPoint-based oral presentation exercises are commonly woven into course agendas throughout undergraduate curricula. Too often, however, students – as do many other presenters – misconstrue the role of PowerPoint slides in presentation deliveries. Typically, students depend too heavily on the slides when conducting their presentations, to an extent that is detrimental to the goals of both mastery of the subject and development of public speaking skills. They often rely on slides as a tool for mindlessly regurgitating information.⁹ As a result of this

⁸ Safaa Mohammad Al-Hebaish, *The Correlation Between General Self-Confidence and Academic Achievement in the Oral Presentation Course*, 2 THEORY & PRAC. IN LANGUAGE 60, 61 (2012) (From Al-Hebaish's research, it can be inferred that as students develop oral communication skills, they will likewise develop self-confidence. Al-Hebaish's research reveals that "lack of self-confidence is thought to be the most dangerous barrier for effective communication," and "where there is self-confidence, there will be good communication." Student's self-confidence, she points out, is relationally tied to academic achievement.)

⁹ See generally Tufte, *supra* note 6, at 17, 31-32 (stating that PowerPoint cultivates a cognitive style that trivializes evidence (i.e., content) and analytical thinking; yet, the bullet outlines it generates "allows speakers to pretend that they are giving a real talk"). See also Ronald Decker & Leon Tyler, *Effect of Notecard Restrictions on Student Presentations*, 10 JOURNAL OF INSTRUCTIONAL PEDAGOGIES1, 2(2013) (suggesting that students' tend to place "counterproductive emphasis on slides rather than message" and to use them as a crutch).

overdependence, they often fail to engage in thorough, rigorous learning of the subject matter that is central to the presentation.

In fact, students sometimes misinterpret the PowerPoint slides themselves to be the most important element of the presentation, instead of the successful, compelling demonstration of sound understanding of subject matters and the effective communication of the same to listeners. This flawed approach of students results in presentations that are void of the cognitive utility that instructors intend. Evidence of students' lack of knowledge, comprehension, critical thinking and comfort-level concerning content is commonly reflected by the following frailties in their presentation delivery:

- Students facing the slide projections repeatedly or, even worse, continually throughout the entire presentation
- Students reading the slides word-for-word throughout presentations
- Densely overcrowded slides, indicating heavy reliance on the slides and rote recitation of information, instead of genuine comprehension
- Students' inability to elaborate on discussion points mentioned in the slides
- Students' inability to answer discussion questions posed by peers or the instructor

Presentations that demonstrate these inadequacies fail to advance the learning of the student-presenters as well as the student-audience members.

III. THE ROLE-PLAY ALTERNATIVE

For decades, role-play has been used pedagogically, in various educational contexts, to bring richness, depth and lasting impact to students' learning experiences. Its effectiveness for enhancing learning has been well researched and demonstrated.¹⁰ Two focal points are noted in the research: role-plays by students as

¹⁰ See, e.g., Yehuda Baruch, *Role-play Teaching: Acting in the Classroom*, 37 MGMT. LEARNING 43 (2006); Kate M. Brown, *Using Role Play to Integrate Ethics into the Business Curriculum: A Financial Management Example*, 13 J. BUS. ETHICS 105 (1994); Ray A. Luechtefeld, *Using Role-Play Simulations and Computationally Intelligent Dialogue Interventions in Research and Education* (published in the Proceedings of the 2008 Industrial Engineering Research Conference 2008); Brinda Oogarah-Pratap, *The Use of Role Play as an Assessment Strategy in Health Education for Trainee Primary School Teachers – A Case Study*, 7 J. SCI. EDUC. 36 (2006); Dan Welty, *Student Involvement in the Teaching of Law*, 7 AM. BUS. L. J. 293 (1969).

part of experiential learning modes and role-plays by teachers integral to their communication of course content. The vast majority of these works explore the former, while few examine the latter.

Despite this distinction, a common thread linking these works is the theory that students' active participation in the learning process is critical to solidifying their learning. Role-plays facilitate active participation, and when done on a group-basis expands to embrace additional elements important to inspiring learning. Dan Welty particularly noted that group activities have the following advantages:

- 1) Where the element of open competition is present, this generates enthusiasm and a positive attitude toward the work the activity requires
- 2) Interpersonal experience is gained which encourages development of persuasive skill, ability to cooperate, etc.
- 3) Class mixing acquaints the students and tends to make them feel the class is a social group to which they belong
- 4) Active participation leads students to believe they are of more value to the class
- 5) Social pressure which teammates bring to bear on laggard students greatly increases their output
- 6) Involvement gives the students more "feeling" for the subject.¹¹

Adding another perspective, Baruch advocates that integrating acting – deliberate role-playing – with the delivery of course content can "improve teaching effectiveness and quality."¹² While Baruch distinguishes his research on teacher role-plays from those works that explore student role-plays, it is worth noting that, in some instances, the element of teaching is common to both groups of role-play participants.¹³ Frequently, course assignments involving student presentations are structured not only for the purpose of the student-presenter's own education, but also for the purpose of teaching student-peers. It could be said, then, that student-presenters assume quasi-teaching roles.

Resting on this interpretation, this author views the principles Baruch establishes as applicable to student role-plays performed in the *Introduction to Law* and *Legal Environment of Business* courses, where group-role play enactments are

¹¹ Welty, *supra* note 10 at 293.

¹² Baruch, *supra* note 10 at 43.

¹³ *Id.*

derived from legal research paper assignments.¹⁴ Accordingly, his theory that “[teacher-acting] in class is one of the most effective ways to engage students, and [that] the application of role-play will initiate and maintain learning” is likewise true for student-presenters (quasi-teachers) in relation to their student-peers.¹⁵

IV. THE ROLE-PLAY ASSIGNMENT

After many years of observing students’ PowerPoint presentations of the end-of-term legal research papers and noting that the vast majority of them were pedagogically ineffective (as well as rote, predictable, and drab), this author replaced the standard oral presentation assignment with one requiring students to perform a creative group role-play that would convey to their student-audience the essential elements of their research paper in ways that would engage their fellow students and leave them informed at the conclusion of the performance. The assignment has been implemented during three consecutive semesters spanning spring 2012 through spring 2013. Student-groups were asked to formulate their role-play scripts around the thesis and central concepts explored and discussed in their group legal research papers. The group-research assignment directed students to develop an argumentative paper, wherein they were to construct clear and persuasive arguments in defense of one side of a legally controversial question, supporting each position with a combination of judicial decisions, scholarly journal articles and other authoritative sources. Students’ research discussions were to acknowledge opposing debate positions, but yet devise and assert convincing counter-arguments to illuminate either the invalidity or weaknesses of those opposing perspectives.

In the interest of ensuring that research papers cover the breadth of discipline-specific content essential to student learning and course objectives, the author generally selects and assigns students’ research topics. The author then guides students with the development of central legal research questions. Examples of some of legal debate questions that have been researched are:

- Should the New York City government win its battle to legislate limits on the sale of sugary drinks?
- Should the Federal Drug Administration be permitted to mandate cigarette companies to include graphic cigarette warning labels on cigarette packaging?

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 45.

- Should employers be permitted to make employment decisions concerning potential or existing employees based on information derived from social media?
- Should employers be able to use credit report data as a basis for making employment decisions pertaining to job applicants or existing employees?

Subsequent to completion of research papers, students are required to formulate scripts to guide their group role-play performances. Considering the possibility that some students might shy away from live role-play performances due to anticipated stage-fright or even lack of confidence, The author offered all students the option of video-recording their role-plays in advance and later replaying the video in class. Still, nearly all student-groups performed live role-plays.

Students were encouraged to create their own role-play format but were also allowed to select from the various examples listed here:

- Debate (e.g., presidential candidates fielding issues-based questions from moderator. Allows for a highly structured and very focused address of primary and ancillary issues.)
- Talk-show (e.g., The Oprah Show. A daytime or evening talk-show formatted around structured, yet free-flowing discussion around the thesis question.)
- Court proceeding (e.g., litigants arguing a case before a judge. Adaptable to a lawsuit scenario around a legally debatable question that has not yet been decided by the highest court.)
- Business settings scenarios (e.g., job interview or an occurrence of an incident in the workplace/business place that brings to light the legally debatable question and the competing perspectives on how the questions should be addressed.)
- News-oriented television show interview (e.g., Anderson Cooper. Interviewing at least two guests, each advocating opposite sides of the thesis question.)
- Roaming camera interviews (e.g., a collection of several brief interviews of persons on- or off-campus, involving dynamic exchanges on the thesis question and related issues.)
- Student-proposed scenario (subject to instructor's approval)

All of the above role-play formats are suitable for portrayal and communication of controversial conversations, which is reflective of argumentative-style legal research papers upon which the role-plays are based. Over the three-semester period that the role-play presentation alternative has been used, students have performed role-plays representative of all above-described categories.

V. EVALUATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Anecdotal evidence gathered to date from six courses over the period of three semesters, suggests the group role-play method is an effective alternative to oral presentations. In general, students have enthusiastically embraced the group role-play concept, while showing unrestrained willingness to separate from their PowerPoint companions. Students of these semesters' *Introduction to Law* and *Legal Environment of Business* courses were asked to voluntarily submit essays summarizing their reflections on the process of writing the group role-play script as well as their experience in performing the group role-play. Approximately 75% of all students submitted these essays.

Overwhelmingly, students responded favorably to the role-play method of learning, reporting that it was more interesting and creative compared to traditional PowerPoint presentations. Students also reported experiencing enhanced learning and heightened critical thinking through the process of formulating and performing their role-plays. They stated the role-play requirement increased students' perceived stake in the assignment, namely their desire to meet their peers' expectations. They also admitted the role-play exercise compelled them to learn the material more thoroughly than if they were required to give a standard PowerPoint presentation. Students also said that the team aspect of the role-plays added synergy to the exercises and encouraged group members to learn from each other.

In light of the pilot stage of this role-play assignment, the author relied heavily on students' reflection essays for an informal assessment of the advancement of anticipated learning-related goals. The reflection essays, together with the grading rubrics (attached and marked "Appendix A") used to assess student role- plays, indicated marked improvement, relative to the standard PowerPoint presentation format used in past semesters.

The role-play presentations were void of many deficiencies common to their PowerPoint counterparts, as students were motivated to assimilate information and demonstrate mastery of the topics in creative, integrated ways. Without slides to act as a repository, students no longer recited bullet points of information, but instead showed more fluid and flexible grasp of subject matters. As intended, the role-plays facilitated higher levels of interaction between the presenters themselves, as well as with audience members were noted. Furthermore, students' elaboration on discussion

points and their ability to respond to questions posed by peers and the instructor become more of a fundamental element of student presentations.

VI. CONCLUSION

For student-users, PowerPoint can create the illusion that they understand presentation topics when, in reality, they possess only surface knowledge of topics, devoid of in-depth comprehension.¹⁶ The pervasive misuse of PowerPoint and the consequent effect of obstructing teaching and learning goals aimed at developing a range of students' cognitive skills, sheds light on the importance of utilizing alternative presentation vehicles.

The group role-play technique discussed is one that has proven, although anecdotally, to be an effective method of presenting the content of argumentative legal research papers. Further study will be conducted to confirm the effectiveness of this role-play approach to oral presentations for research papers. The author will consider ways to increase the sample size and anticipates collecting measurable data utilizing a survey instrument, as well as grading rubrics.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Bumiller, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is PowerPoint*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 27, 2010, at 1.

APPENDIX A**Rubric for Group Role-Play****Based on Legal Research Paper**

Criteria	(4) Excellent	(3) Proficient	(2) Adequate	(1) Limited
Students demonstrated mastery of research topic				
Information communicated is thoughtfully and skillfully synthesized				
Students covered wide range of details salient to the legal research paper				
Role-play effectively informed listeners				
Role-play presentation was engaging, reflected insightfulness, substance and thoughts to supporting details				
Role-play showed imagination and creativity				
Enactment was credible; reflected real-world				

scenario(s)				
Communications skills were effective				
Teamwork (balanced/even collaboration among group members was observed in the role-play)				