Online Presentation Creation Tools

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By Brad Sietz and Caroline Sinkinson

Overview and Definition

Educators regularly use software tools to create the materials for real-time discussion with an audience (e.g., conference presentations, classroom instruction). In today's computing environment, software is increasingly "web-based" or "cloud-based" and does not have to be downloaded or installed on a computer in order for it to be used. Online presentation creation tools are no exception. They are accessible via the Internet, and every aspect of use — from creation, to storage, to dissemination — may occur online rather than on a local hard drive. Beyond simple lecture-based delivery, these tools are increasingly popular in learning contexts because, through thoughtful design, educators may construct sessions with visual and interactive elements that enhance student engagement. Additionally, many of these tools afford the creation of durable teaching artifacts that may be accessed after the initial delivery for on-going learning.

Basis for Current Interest

Microsoft's PowerPoint has long been a ubiquitous teaching and learning tool used for delivering and sharing content. The tool replicates, in electronic form, the slide shows of carousel projectors and overhead transparencies of earlier times; it is the industry standard for presentation software. Nonetheless, the tool has come under scrutiny from various audiences due to some of the limitations of the software itself and the design choices it prompts for its users: ready-made templates for slides that are often text-heavy, oversimplified, too staid, and too linear. Thus, software designers have developed alternatives that offer enhanced functionality for visual appeal, flexible delivery, and easy collaboration with co-presenters. These new applications encourage creativity in presentation

design that can help a presenter make an impact in a potentially more active, engaged, and experiential learning space.

Additionally, the majority of online tools are offered at significantly lower costs than PowerPoint, typically with a freemium pricing model. As academic institutions increasingly face budget pressures, low-cost alternatives have a strong appeal.

This article provides examples of the use of online presentation creation tools in higher education and in libraries grouped into three primary categories: presentation of content, active and engaged classroom learning, and creation of online learning artifacts.

Current Applications in Higher Education

Online presentation creation tools offer many affordances for use in higher education settings, as interaction with content in presentation form is often necessary to support learning and research. More importantly, free, fast and ubiquitous Internet access (wired or wireless) is the expectation for staff and students on university campuses, which makes them an ideal setting for utilizing online presentation tools.

Presentation of Content
Academics have adopted online presentation tools as alternative media for creating content to be shared in venues such as classrooms, conferences, and faculty meetings. The tools may help to present complex concepts in interconnected and non-linear ways. For example, when using Prezi, a user begins with a single blank canvas, onto which many types of content (e.g., shapes, text, video) may be integrated. Users can "zoom" into and through this content to emphasize the relationship between big ideas and specifics. For example, Judit Klein from Auckland University of Technology successfully uses Prezi to communicate the development of a research agenda from initial ideas to plans for the future. Whereas, Steven Pinker from Harvard University uses the

expansiveness of the Prezi canvas to move from component parts of an argument to a stunning visualization of the big picture. Additionally, participants at the 2013 American Society of Cell Biology annual meeting were encouraged to use Prezi to create electronic conference posters because the tool's sequential zooming helps make dense content less difficult to read and follow. Each of these examples employs images and text in compelling combinations for the viewer without moving in a static linear and bulleted fashion.

Active and Engaged Classroom Learning
Many of the new tools enable teachers to move beyond text and lecture as they engage students with course content. While Prezi can accommodate text, images, videos, and maps, tools like Projeqt can integrate social media, such as tweets or Facebook posts, as well as dynamic content from RSS feeds or search alerts. These enhanced features allow educators to deliver and reinforce course content in numerous engaging modes.

By allowing presentations to incorporate communication modes other than text, educators are encouraged to move beyond the perceived shortcomings of PowerPoint. For example, Haiku Deck, an iPad and web application that integrates with a number of image hosting sites (e.g., Flickr), forces users to communicate content with greater emphasis on image rather than on text. For example, Dr. Sean Mullen has adapted Haiku Deck to deliver lectures for his kinesiology course.

In addition to delivering course content, teachers have creatively adapted these tools to communicate assignment guidelines and course expectations. A teacher might use Haiku Deck to describe assignment guidelines or use Projeqt to communicate assignment expectations by providing an example of good work. Traditionally, teachers introduce the course plan through a text-based syllabus. Instead, Sandy Brown Jensen at Lane Community College used Haiku Deck to create a digital course introduction, which sets the course goals. In doing so, she demonstrates her approachability and personal connection to the course far more than a text-based syllabus might.

Educators also use emerging presentation tools to engage students in content creation and authorship. For example, Molly Shields, a college writing instructor at Flagler College, tasks her

students to create a multimodal digital story, using Projeqt, rather than the traditional text-based research paper. Educators have also taken advantage of the collaborative capabilities built into many of these tools. For example, because Prezi presentations may be edited simultaneously by up to ten students, Derek Bruff, from Vanderbilt University, designed an assignment for students to create a debate or concept map collaboratively. In doing so, students work in teams and have the opportunity to extend their comprehension of course content. Similarly, Kelly Falcone at Palomar College has asked groups of students to use Google Slides (part of Google Drive) to collaboratively construct presentations.

Creation of Online Learning Artifacts
Finally, these tools allow users not only to create content online, but also to readily share these materials with the public. In this way, the tools are optimal for creating durable materials that reinforce students' learning. Teachers may embed the content into external web sites, blogs, or learning management systems, which allows them to effectively flip the classroom. One such tool, Present.me allows audio and video recording of a speaker while simultaneously capturing a slide show. For example, an instructor can verbally annotate her presentation, so a student can review the material, with the instructor's "help," at any time.

Applications in Academic Library Instruction

Librarians often seek tools to make their instruction more engaging and appealing, so there are many ways online presentation creation tools can be used to further these goals.

Presentation of Content
For conferences, there are hundreds of examples of librarians using online presentation creation tools, with Prezi being by far the most popular. In some instances, the tool has been the topic of the session itself, as in this LOEX 2014 presentation, in which Coastal Carolina librarians describe the use of Prezi to reinvigorate library instruction. More commonly, librarians use the tools to author a presentation, such as this ACRL 2013 panel presentation by librarians from the University of Utah.

In the classroom, Prezi can also be helpful to demonstrate how to narrow a topic for a research writing course, as found in this example from the University of Dubuque. Or, in this example, Coastal Carolina University librarians demonstrate how Prezi templates can be used to teach the evaluation of sources.

Librarians have also been using Powtoon, which focuses on animating presentations in order to allow presenters to make a narrative. Beth Fuchs, for example, used Powtoon to make a memorable library welcome for an orientation at the University of Kentucky.

Active and Engaged Classroom Learning
Online presentation tools are easy for students to use for research sharing, brainstorming/mapping, graphic organization, time-lining, storyboarding, and collaborative activities. These tools can also readily create presentations that incorporate pictures, and typically less text, than PowerPoint. The tools are ideal for visually orienting students to library spaces and services. At the University of Michigan-Dearborn, graduate students are shown an image-rich Haiku Deck presentation for their library orientation, while at CSU Dominguez Hills a presentation provides undergraduates an overview of the library.

Creation of Online Learning Artifacts
Often, librarians wish to reach students who have not attended a library session, or simply want to review content with those who have. The interactivity and visual detail of these online tools make them useful for sharing content online, as exhibited by this Prezi presentation from the Community College of Allegheny County about citing a journal article in MLA style. Alternatively, the tools may be used to describe a service, like this short descriptive Powtoon video about interlibrary loan from Colorado State University.

Another excellent use of online tools is to provide virtual tours of libraries. A library tour from Seattle Pacific University uses a Prezi presentation to provide a high and low-level of view of the library, which allows the user to see the SPU Library's four levels at a big-picture perspective, and then to zoom in to reveal more detail about certain aspects of the facility and its services. Similarly, the orientation to Cornerstone University's library uses a Prezi presentation, which starts with an overview of library services but also has a nice spatial tour of the library.

Potential Value

A major benefit of online presentation tools is that there is a low barrier to adoption for the user. This is true for two reasons. First, online tools are typically either free or require a nominal monthly fee. Second, because these tools do not require anything to be downloaded, it is unlikely that librarians would need to get permission from their IT department to use them.

By virtue of their recent development, these tools offer the ability to create more sophisticated and modern-looking presentations. They have been designed to reflect a more image-oriented design aesthetic. Online presentation tools also tend to be compatible with all devices including mobile phones and tablets.

Because the tools are web-based, it is easier to access a presentation from anywhere (assuming there is an Internet connection) without having to worry about portable drives or other physical media that can be misplaced or forgotten. Additionally, multiple people can access and edit an in-process presentation from wherever they happen to be located, improving version control and facilitating collaboration.

Potential Hurdles

There are numerous challenges for those considering adopting these tools, but the degree to which they are a challenge for a librarian will depend upon an individual's capabilities and interests as well as her or his work environment.

PowerPoint is a very functional, familiar, well-tested tool, and thus a prudent default choice for creating a presentation. Virtually everyone with whom a presenter interacts will not question or have a difficult time understanding why that tool was chosen for a particular presentation. Using an online presentation tool likely will entail more risk.

When presenting in an unfamiliar place, librarians can be confident that if there is one piece of presentation software readily available and working correctly, it is going to be PowerPoint. Therefore, it is important to communicate with the IT

department or conference hosts ahead of time to make certain the online tool is supported.

In addition, online presentation tools need Internet access, which may not be readily available in all presentation locations. To ameliorate this situation, most online tools offer offline, downloadable options that allow access to the presentation. So, with a little preparation, worries about Internet access can be addressed.

The staying power of web-based presentation tools versus PowerPoint is also a concern. Many free and popular tools have disappeared when their creators could not find a stable revenue model. Thus, librarians need to assess their depth of interest in pursuing a new tool and be certain there is enough time and energy to reap the potential benefits.

Beyond the technical aspects, moving to other presentation creation tools sometimes requires presenters to really shift their way of thinking about presentations. PowerPoint is quite linear (Slide 1, Slide 2, Slide 3), and thus the presentation narrative almost always fits that linear style. However, some online presentation tools are designed to be more dynamic and free flowing, which, if not properly planned for in the design of the presentation material, can come off as haphazard and difficult to follow. Plus, while using advanced graphics can potentially make materials more appealing, it can easily be overdone and make presentations too busy or distracting. Focusing on pedagogical purpose and audience needs over a tool's capabilities should prevent such misuse.

A related hurdle is that the vast majority of librarians have spent considerable time learning how to use PowerPoint and developing a bevy of presentation files in their personal library. Adopting new online presentation tools can bring about considerable switching costs, as unfamiliar software menus and controls need to be learned, and past presentations need to be imported or redesigned completely in order to take advantage of the new tool's capabilities. For some, Google Presentations may be as well-known as PowerPoint, but other tools are likely to be unfamiliar to students. Therefore, if a tool is to be used in class, preparation and training for quick use are necessary.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, many of these tools are not compliant with ADA accessibility standards. Currently, screen readers and other adaptive technologies cannot translate the content outputs or authoring interfaces. However, several of the vendors, such as Prezi, are aware of these shortcomings and are working to address the issue.

Conclusion

As digital environments offer authoring and sharing tools at low costs, it makes sense for instruction librarians to consider whether online presentation tools meet existing needs. Online presentation tools offer an abundance of applications in higher education and academic library settings. The tools reflect trends towards openness, participation, and collaboration, which multimodal digital landscapes enable. While PowerPoint is the dominant presentation software, instruction librarians should remain open to the increasing number and sophistication of web-based tools that are out there and ascertain whether their affordances meet their pedagogical goals.

Tools Discussed

- Google Slides: http://www.google.com/slides/about/

- Haiku Deck: https://www.haikudeck.com/

- Powtoon: http://www.powtoon.com/

- Present.me: https://present.me

- Prezi: http://prezi.com

- Projeqt: http://projeqt.com/

Further Readings

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