7

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT...
NEXT-GENERATION PRESENTATION TOOLS

Scenario

Alexia is working toward a bachelor's degree in security management, and several of her courses require students to make team presentations. She has been closely watching her classmates' presentations, determined to find ways to capture her peers' attention and stand out from the group. She pays particular attention to the presentations by fellow members of her project team because she will soon be joining them in making their first joint presentation. In previous experiences, she has seen considerable time lost exchanging and managing different versions of files, often across applications and operating systems. As a result, she begins investigating online presentation tools, hoping to find an application that supports collaboration, is accessible by all team members, and is free to use.

When the team meets to work on the project, Alexia proposes using a presentation tool based on the idea of a single "canvas" rather than a sequence of slides. The group will be explaining how facial-recognition software analyzes images. Using the tool she is recommending, Alexia is able to link to and reference the work of the leading scholars in the field. Because Alexia will be sharing this presentation online, she is confident that some in her audience will explore the links she embeds. She places the image of a human face at the center of the working area and begins to label the features around it. Team members can put explanations and web links further out on the canvas. This organizational approach allows the face to serve as the central point of the presentation and helps clarify how additional information is related to it. The application lets presenters zoom in on each explanation as needed and follow links to online demonstrations of how the facial-recognition software works—and how it can be fooled. The group divides the canvas into four regions and places their comments, images, videos, and links in their respective areas.

Alexia's part of the presentation comes last, and she solicits questions from the class. As she and her team members respond, she moves around the presentation canvas to highlight various resources as they are needed for explanation. At one point she fields an advanced question and is able to go to original work to find the answer. The tool allowed the team to develop the presentation smoothly and efficiently, and the nonsequential nature of the tool—and the fact that the audience can follow on their own computers—results in a richer experience by allowing the discussion to guide the presentation in unplanned directions.

1 What is it?

Tools that deliver electronic presentations have become a staple of the educational enterprise at all levels. New tools are emerging, however, that allow instructors to craft presentations that more closely reflect new approaches to teaching and learning. Many of these tools allow collaboration between multiple authors, and some use nonlinear branching or sequencing so that a presenter can take audience questions and follow them to a reasonable conclusion without concern that doing so will break up the sequential character of a slide set. A presentation framework that moves away from a linear structure to a storyboard approach can help clarify the ways that discussion points are related to one another. In such a framework, animated zooms and pans let presenters move from overview to detail and thereby reveal a hierarchy of ideas. By supporting audience input and live online interaction during a presentation, some of these tools provide additional value for viewers who want to follow from their own computers.

2 Who's doing it?

Many of these next-generation presentation tools are relatively new and have not been widely adopted, making their impact difficult to assess. Because many are free, they fill a need among students and professional presenters alike who enjoy experimenting with alternative presentation applications to more fully engage audiences. Similarly, the tools offer easy access to anyone who doesn't have or chooses not to use traditional slide-based presentation software. Presentations created using these online applications have been used as sales tools and marketing collateral, and they are finding their niche among faculty who find value in the different feature sets and presentation models that some next-generation tools support.

3 How does it work?

At the simplest level, most of these tools take the presentation off the desktop and move it onto the Internet. In making this change, many of the application designers have clearly taken the opportunity to rethink presentations and provide features to support updated models. Tools like SlideShare provide an online archive of the presentation for later review, linking, and commenting. Prezi uses a single-layer canvas that allows users to place information anywhere on the virtual canvas and then zoom in or out, rotate the canvas, or click on an element to isolate it. The result is a very different composition pattern from that of a slideshow, one that is designed to reveal information in a nonlinear fashion and promote greater audience interaction. Those presentation applications that more closely follow the traditional slide model often reinterpret it. Zoho Show, for instance, provides features that allow audience

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members—if permission has been granted—to make comments and changes in the presentation in real time, thus turning a presentation application into a live collaboration tool.

4 Why is it significant?

Moving presentations to the Internet might portend a shift away from the aging click-and-talk paradigm toward a model that is platform-independent, open to multiple contributors, and stored for public use. Although sequential, slide-based presentations remain fixtures in many educational settings, the model is not ideal for all learning activities, and newer presentation tools push instructors to think differently about the content of their courses and how it is presented. As new kinds of presentation tools infuse learning in higher education, audience interaction could change the essential character of the audience-speaker relationship. To this end, presentation tools that allow audience members to download, follow along, and contribute may invite viewers to provide remixes or blogs of what they see and hear. As a result, questions of ownership may arise that redefine attribution of creative content.

One valuable aspect of these tools is that presentations can be easily accessible to all interested parties for review and study. As such, they can be very rich resources that include fine details, references, and even links to raw data that promote further study. Presentations become less an end in themselves and more a compilation of insights, snapshots, or interpretations of data that can be used multiple times in different ways. Making libraries of presentations available from multiple presenters to be explored by users could promote a different sensibility about presentations in general while encouraging audience exploration of the original concepts and data.

5 What are the downsides?

Whirling canvases, zooms, pans, and excessive animation in general have the potential to distract viewers, and because these tools facilitate such maneuvers, the end product might in some cases be more disorienting than illustrative. Moreover, the flexibility these tools provide means that a single presentation is often delivered differently each time it is given, and in some circumstances this is a significant drawback. These products compel users to rethink how they present information, and new models of presentation differ sufficiently from traditional slideshows to require a new set of best practices based on the shift of the presentation paradigm. Some users—presenters and viewers alike—will likely continue to prefer a more traditional presentation format. In addition, because audiences may be unfamiliar with them, these new visual metaphors might not represent content as effectively as the presenter thinks they will. While web-based applications are theoretically platform-independent, in practice not all of these tools support all browsers equally, and as a result certain functionality is more effective on some browsers than others. All of these tools require Internet access, and some may be clunky, requiring high-resolution images. Many

have fewer features than established presentation tools, and some do not share content with other applications or allow downloads to user-owned media devices. Further, there is no guarantee that these companies will remain in business, and if a company disappears, so too might the presentations it hosts. Because presentations can be made open to public viewing, students and faculty who select that option need to understand that doing so raises the bar for ensuring that the message is correct and clear and that proper attributions are included.

6 Where is it going?

These applications and their introduction of new approaches raise an expectation for further changes to the overall presentation model. As audiovisual media become increasingly easy to include and manipulate, we can expect broader acceptance, wider use, and stronger recognition of the ways in which the medium shapes the message. As these newer paradigms increase in sophistication to support complex layering and 3D imaging, they might become integral to classroom presentation. In such an environment, an anatomy lecture might use 3D representation, zoom, and layered images to show, with a few clicks, both the exact location in the human body where the lung tissue under discussion is located and the character of its cell structure. Add animation, and viewers could see how different diseases might compromise that tissue.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The real value of these products may be that they require a re-examination of the nature of information presentation and sharing. Where they promote nonlinear thought patterns, they force a re-thinking of the dynamic of teaching and learning and, in this way, support a creative new look at presentations in general. For courses where the linear format is not the most effective mode of presentation—where student queries, experimental results, or group brainstorming cry out for tools that support free-form lecture branching—these new modalities hold particular promise. Students, many of whom may have no allegiance to more traditional presentation patterns, should be quick to see the advantages of these new paradigms and may become early adopters. Finally, as audience collaboration, multimedia integration, and cross-platform viewing all become part of the presentation model, these tools could bring about a more thorough merging of in-person and remote classroom audiences.

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