Teaching on the Go Seminar

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Outline

1. Pop Psychology: The Curse of Knowledge
   The Made to Stick thinking man’s idea of what teaching is (SUCCESS)

2. Presentation techniques & rewriting your presentations
   The Idea of separating powerpoint notes to self from stuff the students see, to make yourself (the lecturer) relevant again.
   The creation of notes, and lecture notes, and some artwork.
   Podcasting/recording your lectures for distribution.

3. Tools of the trade/summary
   You’ll need a wordpress.com account (free), the podpress plugin, an Ipod, and a digital recorder. Total cost: 20 euros. Total benefit: incalculable.

4. Discussion/Roundtable

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0. Introduction

First, this is new to me. I’ve never taught presentation technique before, so consider this a sort of experiment. Second, I have no formal training in this or any other type of educational theory or practice. I’m self taught. The problem with being self taught is, you have a fool for a master. So feel free to educate me along the way if I say something really stupid.

I’m going to use the first twenty minutes or so to try to give you a sense of how I do what I do when I do it, how I approach a presentation of rather technical, potentially boring material. I’ve a load of resources for you at the end of this presentation, so don’t worry if I say something and you miss something, it’ll all be there at the end for you in a handout.

First, let’s talk a little pop psychology, then we’ll move on to constructing the lecture in outline form, then I’ll offer some tips on electronic delivery: PowerPoint tips, website tips, podcasting tips, and some experimental feedback ideas I’m having a go at now. Finally, I’d like to have a discussion with you about what you find useful, and what I might think about improving with my own delivery.

In one paragraph, here’s my message today: Have a message. Keep the message really, really simple. Delegate the details to a technical paper or a handout. Slim the slides down, make presenters notes. Make yourself integral to the lecture again. Think Story. Think parable, not sound bite. Think 21st Century, not 19th.

1. Pop Psychology: Attention Deficit Disorders, The Curse of Knowledge, and SUCCESS.

The human animal is not built to concentrate on an abstract topic for a long time. Studies [4] have shown the average young, well rested, interested, well fed student will concentrate for twenty to twenty five minutes on a single topic.
Most lectures in UL are one hour long. This means when you allow for the class settling down and leaving, there is at least 20 minutes of dead space in which each student is somehow somewhere else. That figure reduces if the students are tired, if the material is boring or overly abstract, or if the lecturer is boring or tired or bored themselves.

Humans have attention disorders. All of us. We as lecturers have to get around that disorder using, essentially, tips and tricks, designed to stimulate the listener into paying more than their usual level of attention to you and your important material.

By definition, lecturers suffer from the curse of knowledge [1]. We have the information, and make the mistake of mapping what we know onto the students, expecting the students to understand the material in the same way and to the same depth as we do. The best example of this is picking out a tune.

I’m going to tap a tune out with a pencil, and I’d like you to try and guess it. The tune is playing in all it’s grandeur in my head, but all you hear is the tapping.

*What Song am I playing? Write it down.*

If I assume all I need to do is tap out the tune for you to understand the full complexity of the song that’s playing in my head, I’ve made the mistake
of falling into the curse of knowledge.

There are loads of ways to get around this problem: extra readings, problem based learning, in-class exercises; different approaches all with costs and benefits. Your discipline will inform your choice of teaching technique. I will advise you to think about the story you’re trying to tell your students rather than the bullet point by bullet point approach to each piece of examinable information.

Jerome Bruner’s narrative theory of learning informs this approach. Bruner’s idea is that people understand information when it is presented through stories. Stories have several components. You can shape your lecture to include these components. The more of these components you include, the more memorable your lecture will be.

For example, think about JFK’s famous speech wanting to put a man on the moon in less than ten years {Get JFK Audio}. What a speech! This has six main elements:

1. **Simple.** Go to moon.
2. **Unexpected.** Duh.
3. **Concrete.** Go to moon or don't.
4. **Credible.** He's the President.
5. **Emotional.** National pride, etc.
6. **Stories.** Taps them a bit, not much.

### 2. Rewriting your presentations

Putting a presentation together usually takes the following form: you have some information you have to impart to the students. There is a literature or textbooks with that information, and you synthesize this information in bullet points which you transfer onto the PowerPoint deck. That is your presentation. PowerPoint tips normally give you formatting tips and tricks regarding the presentation of these bullet points, for example, no more than 3 bullet points per slide, minimum 24 point font size, etc. I’m not
here to tell you these tips, because I think, at root, these tips are bullshit.

The reason these tips are bullshit is: students don’t need to see bullet points on projectors. They need sentences in handouts. You need bullet points to get through your lecture. So: slides should contain images, and small pieces of text. Students should get a handout, at the end of the lecture or available for download, containing the main points of your lecture. You get the bullet points to make during the lecture. And you’re sorted. Students now have a reason to show up to your lectures again: because you provide context for the information in the handouts. Students won’t understand the material from the slides: they are just images and text.

Students should have access to all the information in your lecture, but they should need you to provide the story, the emotion, the context, of the material you’re presenting. If they need you to make the ideas stick, then they will show up, and, if you are doing a good job, they will remember the story you tell them in broad strokes.

So, how to put a presentation together as a story? First, go to the literature. The literature is, at base, a conversation between people of differing opinions, which naturally supplies a story. The material should have an importance to it. If there isn’t, why are you teaching it? Second, take one of the points of view in the literature, and expand upon it. Find a real world story closely aligned to it, a numerical example, or a horror story, or something. This injects emotion and concreteness into the presentation. Now throw in something unexpected. There is a wealth of material on how to turn a lecture inside out at the end to create excitement.

Finally, make sure to reiterate your main message. What did you want to say in this lecture? Say it at the start, priming the audience with something like: “if you only remember one thing from this lecture, remember blah blah blah.” Repeat it as you make the point properly somewhere in the lecture. Summarise it at the end. This allows the students who tune in and out (i.e., all of them at one point or another) in the lecture to get the point. Which is the object of the lecture. Good.

Let’s look at a topic from your own work. Take the last lecture you
gave, and break it down using the sheet I provide.

3. Making presentations sing

Now let’s get to the mechanics of the presentation yourself. You have a story to tell, you have some points to make, and you have some stuff the students are going to have to know because you’re going to be testing them on in a few weeks. Let’s assume that from now on.

The medium I’ll assume you’re using is Microsoft Word, and Microsoft PowerPoint. I should say at the outset that I hate both of these programs, but I understand that’s what you must work with. I also understand that students will expect you to provide them with information in some printed format, so you’ll have to do a handout for them [2]. The advantages of a handout with full sentences and well developed ideas rather than snippets are obvious, but two important points need to be made [3]. First, by making the handout, you put students’ minds at ease about the lecture: they know they’ll get the important points handed to them, so it relaxes them. Second, creating a handout forces you to be a better lecturer, and gives you material if you ever want to write a textbook on the subject. Use Microsoft Word to create the handout, and write it as I’m writing this one. Be generous with the margins to let the students write notes in them, and be sure to give more than a summary, and links to online content as well as more traditional lecture materials like books and papers students will find in the library.

Now onto PowerPoint. Using the lecture note you’ve just written, extract the main points as bullet points. Launch PowerPoint. Start using PowerPoint the way you’ve always done it, with a subject line, and a few subpoints for each topic. Think of a graphic to show this main point in relief. I’ll have more on the subject of graphics in a second. Now each slide should look roughly like this;
Here’s the trick: take the five points, and put them into the \textit{notes} section of the presentation, and write the notes on a board or just speak them as you go through the lecture. In PowerPoint, go to \textit{View->Notes Page}, and copy and paste the five points in there. Those are your lecture notes, the students don’t get to see them. Now take the graphic, and make the graphic the full size of the slide if you like, or place it wherever you think it would make the most impact. Right click on the image and choose to ‘Send to Back’. This overlays the text in the Title box on the image. Your slides are now just as focused as before, but you have avoided the Death by PowerPoint problem, and made your slides more interesting. You have also just made yourself integral to the students’ understanding of the material again: because you create the context through which the students can get the information most readily.

Your slides thus go from this:

\begin{slide}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Point 1
  \begin{itemize}
    \item Point 2
    \begin{itemize}
      \item Point 3
      \begin{itemize}
        \item Point 4
        \begin{itemize}
          \item Point 5
        \end{itemize}
      \end{itemize}
    \end{itemize}
  \end{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{slide}
All you do is print the PowerPoint deck out for yourself with the notes for each slide, and you’re sorted for each lecture, slide by slide, as the image below shows.

Now, where do you get those images? Obviously if you have graphs to show, that’s your image for the slide. Don’t use PowerPoint’s clip art feature.
It just looks really stale. Tables should be printed out on your handout—don’t show them on the screen, students just can’t read them. What about other images? First you can get them from images.google.com. Make sure to choose large file sizes that won’t look pixelated in a large lecture hall. Second, you can get really interesting images from www.flickr.com. There are a host of free ‘stock’ photo galleries at www.presentationzen.com, and if you need really high quality images, you can buy them at www.istockphoto.com for a dollar or two. I use all of these in my presentations. Try to think a little tangentially to the subject to get the right image. If you want to show an image about credibility, use an image of a doctor. If your point is about growth, show a child holding a small plant. You get the idea. Just have a visually relevant image, which gets the viewer’s attention and keeps it.

4. Getting your lecture notes to the students

In UL we have public folders and sulis, but they are a really substandard way of communicating with students. I use a blog, which I set up for free on www.wordpress.com. It took 30 seconds. I’m going to set one up for you now, by picking a volunteer and uploading some content for them right away. Now each lecture becomes a blog post, each slide can be shown too using www.slideshare.net. Each link you give in the presentation is now live, and students can obviously download your handout (not your lecture notes) as well as a podcast of the lecture if you choose to give one.

There are many aspects to podcasting lectures people might be uncomfortable with. Personally I feel that the 21st Century, there is no reason not to podcast your lectures for your students. They suffer from Attention disorders, like I said, so give them every opportunity to learn something when they do switch on by accessing your website.

Here’s what you need to do a podcast: a digital recorder, like an ipod with an iTrip, or a laptop with a microphone (they can all record), and a podcasting software like www.podpress.com. That’s it. Assuming you have an ipod, the whole setup will cost you €0—20.

Now upload the podcast to the web, and you’re done. Students can
now go to your lectures when you’re not there. It’s practically a lecturer’s dream come true.

5. In Summary

This method of making a story out of the material you have to teach works for me. I teach relatively technical stuff, so the difficulty of the material shouldn’t be too much of a factor. The tricky part is distilling what you want to say down into one main point per presentation, and pulling that one point out into a one or two hour lecture using your handout/technical paper format for the student to take away. Try to make the material sing, give it a story, make the story credible, concrete, and emotional. Add a little uncertainty, and you’re sorted. The students will remember your presentation. Then make PowerPoint slides out of the handout you’ve just written, put the bullet points into the notes section of the presentation file, put an appropriate graphic in their place at the back of the slide, and you’re done. Give the lecture. Record the lecture, and let the students (and anybody else who cares enough to listen) at it. This is the 21st Century, there’s no excuse for death by PowerPoint, public folders, or non-podcasted lectures.

References

(Print)


(Web)

Www.istockphoto.com

Www.images.google.com
Handout

1. What song do you think this is? ___________________
2. Break down your last lecture:

**Simple/Message**

________________________________________________________________________

**Unexpected**

________________________________________________________________________

**Credible**

________________________________________________________________________

**Concrete**

________________________________________________________________________

**Emotional**

________________________________________________________________________

**Story**

________________________________________________________________________